

TWO SHORT PLAYS AND TWO LONG POEMS

Compilation by PDGazette, July 2015

Ever Young, by Alice Gerstenberg

Excluded Middle, by Edgar Lee Masters

The Anniversary, by Anton Chekhov

The Cremona Violin, by Amy Lowell

EVER YOUNG

a play in one-act

by Alice Gerstenberg

The following one-act play is reprinted from *A Book of One-act Plays*. Ed. Barbara Louise Schafer. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1922. It is now in the public domain and may therefore be performed without royalties.

CHARACTERS

MRS. PHOEBE PAYNE-DEXTER

MRS. AGNES DORCHESTER

MRS. WILLIAM BLANCHARD

MRS. CAROLINE COURTNEY-PAGE

[A corner of the lobby of the Poincianna Hotel, Palm Beach, showing wicker chairs (with cretonne cushions) sheltered by palms. From the distance come faint strains of an orchestra.]

[MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER enters from right as if looking for a comfortable chair. She pulls the chairs about until she has placed them to suit herself. She is followed by MRS. DORCHESTER, who also chooses a chair to suit herself. MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER'S face is wrinkled but there is little sign of age in her worldly humorous eyes, her tightly corseted figure, her vibrant personality. She wears a lavender brocade evening gown and a dog-collar of diamonds. Her white hair is perfectly marcelled and her well manicured hands flash with rings. She uses a diamond studded lorgnette and carries a large hotel room key. She takes her chair with the authority of a leader.]

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: There was no need to hurry through dinner, Agnes, there are plenty of chairs.

[MRS. DORCHESTER follows MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER. She is a sweet placid-faced woman with white hair, not marcelled, and the rosy

complexion of one who has lived without hurry on a country estate. She wears eye-glasses; she is gowned in rich gold silk and is rather too overladen with old-fashioned jewelry, ear-rings, bracelets, pendants, rings, mostly amber, gold and black onyx. She carries a capacious bag of black and gold brocade which contains her knitting and which she begins to pull out as soon as she is comfortably seated. The ball of wool and the baby sock she is knitting are soft blue.]

MRS. DORCHESTER: We missed out chance last night because you lingered over your coffee.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Dominatingly) I always linger over my coffee. I always did with Thomas when he was alive. Our family always has lingered over the coffee.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Mildly) In another moment there would not have been a chair vacant. Which one do you prefer?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Put one aside for Mrs. Blanchard. I nodded to her in this direction as we came out of the dining-room.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Sits) She will like this corner. We can see every one who crosses the lobby.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Using her lorgnette) How many sights and how many frights shall we see tonight? Really, Agnes, I wish you would give up wearing your old-fashioned onyx and amber. Why don't you turn in all that junk and get something new and fashionable? (Sits.)

MRS. DORCHESTER: Oh, I've never had any desire to buy jewelry since my husband died.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: But that was ages ago. I've had all my diamonds reset since Thomas went. I had my wedding ring melted and molded again into an orange wreath.

MRS. DORCHESTER: There's the young bride who arrived today.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Where?

MRS. DORCHESTER: Over there near the fountain in a very low gown.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: I don't see her.

MRS. DORCHESTER: She moved behind the column.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: I can't see her. Why didn't you tell me before the column got in the way?

MRS. DORCHESTER: If you were not so vain, Phoebe, you would wear decent glasses like mine.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Indeed, I can see perfectly well.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Well, I don't blame you for using your lorgnette. It does add distinction to your Payne-Dexter manner.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Amused) What! Are you still impressed by my manner?

MRS. DORCHESTER: I have been for fifty years--dear me, Phoebe, is it really fifty years ago since you and I were débutantes?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Looking about carefully) Shhh! Don't let the hotel know I'm seventy.

MRS. DORCHESTER: No one guesses it.

MRS. PAYNE DEXTER: I certainly don't feel it, but let me tell you, these young débutantes of today with their supercilious airs, their sophisticated conversation, their smoking in public places, are not going to crowd me back into a grandmother's corner. No! I shall live another twenty years at least, if only to see these young things grow into the troubles of married life, and it will please me.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Why have you such animosity toward the débutantes? You terrorize them. Everywhere they side-step for you. In elevators, corridors, in the ballroom, on the beach, they put themselves out to be deferential to you. It is "Good morning, Mrs. Payne-Dexter," "Good afternoon, Mrs. Payne-Dexter," "Good evening, Mrs. Payne-Dexter," but they never see me, even though we have been here since the opening of the season.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: It is because you don't create the atmosphere which demands their attention. I am putting on all the Payne-Dexter airs I can think of to terrorize them: I want to make the débutantes and their smart young men side-step for me. Their youth and prettiness is no longer mine, but I hold over them the whip hand. I am a dowager, a member of the society that once ruled New York, and does still to a certain extent and they shall bow to me as long as I inhale one breath of life!

MRS. DORCHESTER: I do believe you are jealous of the present generation.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: I am, I am fiercely jealous.

MRS. DORCHESTER: But we have had our own day, Phoebe, it is their turn. It is our time to sit back and give them a chance.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Agnes, you have kept your health living on your estate in Long Island, but you have watched the inevitable drying up of flowers and leaves in autumn and you have followed what seems to you the inevitable progress of autumn into winter--well, my hair may be white as snow, but my blood is still red!

MRS. DORCHESTER: Your vitality is a marvel to every one. Your club work, civic and social leadership make even the doctors amazed at you.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: The doctors are my worst enemies. They tell me I must not eat this, I must not do that. They tell me I am getting old, that I must rest. I do not wish to rest, I simply won't grow old. When

one has been a leader, one can not let younger women usurp one's position.

MRS. DORCHESTER: You still have your leadership.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: I still have it because I will have it, because I will not let it go, but I have to strive harder for it every year, every year I must grow more imperious, more dominating, more terrorizing to hold supremacy over this new independent generation. (Looks off left.) There is that little presumptuous May Whigham. She is eighteen and so rude I should like to spank her.

MRS. DORCHESTER: They all fear you, Phoebe.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (With grim humor) I hope so. I shall not be pushed into a corner as long as I still draw one breath of life!

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Looking off right) Good evening, Mrs. Blanchard.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: We have kept a chair for you.

[MRS. BLANCHARD enters upstage from audience. She is thin, a trifle bent with age and needs a walking cane. It is gold-topped and suspended on it is a fan of lavender plumes, and a gold mesh bag. In her left hand she carries a book. She is exquisitely gowned in light blue chiffon and rare old lace. Her face is like a cameo, scarcely a wrinkle in it, and her smile is illuminatingly young. She wears a diamond necklace but no rings.]

MRS. BLANCHARD: Good evening, Mrs. Payne-Dexter, Mrs. Dorchester.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Helping Mrs. Blanchard) Sit down, Mrs. Blanchard.

MRS. BLANCHARD: No, thank you, do not help me. I am about to throw it away.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Throw your cane away?

MRS. BLANCHARD: (With a light in her eyes) Yes, I am not going to need it in a week or so.

MRS. DORCHESTER: I heard of a woman the other day who dispensed with her cane.

MRS. BLANCHARD: Who was it?

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Nods off right) That golf champion, what's her name, she's over there--the one with the burnt V on her chest--she told me all about a case, but, dear me, I never can remember names.

MRS. BLANCHARD: I shall have to ask her about it.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Are you getting stronger Mrs. Blanchard?

MRS. BLANCHARD: I must get stronger. I am tired of depending upon a cane. Everywhere I go people are putting themselves out to be polite to me. Men help me, women send their men to help me, chauffeurs help me, bell-boys help me, waiters help me, débutantes help me--

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Débutantes! I can scarcely believe it!

MRS. BLANCHARD: The débutantes hop around me like so many sand-flies--all of them wanting to help me walk. I feel like swatting them with this (shakes cane). Their politeness to my infirmity is an insult. If they would only be rude!

MRS. DORCHESTER: Mrs. Payne-Dexter was just complaining that they were too rude.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Rude! They are!

MRS. BLANCHARD: If they are rude to you it is a compliment. They

do not look upon you as old and decrepid. I resent their solicitude. In a day or two I shall throw this old thing away! (She tosses the cane aside.)

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Mrs. Blanchard!

MRS. BLANCHARD: It is no idle threat, I mean it!

MRS. DORCHESTER: But you told me you had used it fifteen years.

MRS. BLANCHARD: So I have, and it is old enough to throw away. It is the oldest leg I have and it is going to be thrown away.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Oldest?

MRS. BLANCHARD: What are you doubting?

MRS. DORCHESTER: My dear Mrs. Blanchard, you just said your cane is the oldest leg you have--

MRS. BLANCHARD: So it is.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Humorously) Mrs. Dorchester would like to know just exactly how old the others are.

MRS. BLANCHARD: The others are just exactly not more than nine months!

MRS. DORCHESTER: Nine months!

MRS. BLANCHARD: Do you think I should say ninety years?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Isn't it a little nearer to the truth?

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Triumphantly) But it is not the truth! The wonderful truth is that my legs are not seventy-one years old, they are not more than nine months old. I have been reading an amazing book.

[She holds the book up.]

MRS. DORCHESTER: What is it?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Using lorgnette) Truth and Youth.

MRS. BLANCHARD: This book says that every cell in our body is completely new every nine months.

MRS. DORCHESTER: I heard about that. My daughter was reading a book about that, I forget what it was called.

MRS. BLANCHARD: Each cell reproduces itself according to the impression given to it by our subconscious mind. As we grow old we hold a thought of age and impress our cells with that thought, but if we rid ourselves of the illusion of old age we can remain ever young.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Let me have this book. I would pay a fortune for youth.

MRS. BLANCHARD: We do not have to pay for youth. We just have to think it and be it. It is very simple they say, when you have faith.

MRS. DORCHESTER: What was that book my daughter was reading-- dear, dear, I never can remember names, and titles and numbers!

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Too much wool, Agnes, I tell you you are growing old--

MRS. BLANCHARD: She does not look it.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Her mind is one hundred and fifty years old!

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Good-naturedly) Not quite. I have had too many financial matters to attend to since my husband died to let me slip too far behind the times, but I believe in accepting old age with as good a grace as possible.

MRS. BLANCHARD: Rubbish! That is antediluvian! I am just beginning to learn how to live. Do you know I have just obtained my divorce?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Have you divorced Mr. Blanchard, after all these years?

MRS. BLANCHARD: Yes, after all these years. I suppose you know the story of my life. It was nationally commented upon when my daughter married the Duke of Caubreigh.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: My St. Louis friends often mentioned you, that is why I was so interested in meeting you here this season. When my husband was alive he used to hear things at the clubs.

MRS. BLANCHARD: No doubt he did. My husband has been notoriously unfaithful to me. I grieved about it for more than forty years and I never had the sense to get rid of him. Never had the courage until now--but now, it is all as clear as day to me-- If I have been a fool for forty years must I stay a fool forever? No, I kicked over the traces, with my wooden leg--and I am a free woman.

MRS. DORCHESTER: How odd, to think of your wilfully giving up your husband when we widows so wish ours back again.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Did your husband contest it?

MRS. BLANCHARD: My husband was amazed, indignant--he writes me imploring letters. He is old now and ready to settle down. Now, when he is ready to sit before the fireplace and watch me knit, I have played a trick on him--I am not ready to sit before the fireplace and I would rather play roulette than knit. By the way I gambled three hundred dollars away last night.

MRS. DORCHESTER: We left early.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: That is, at midnight.

MRS. DORCHESTER: We rode around a bit before coming in. It was so balmy and I just love to ride in the chairs.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: I suppose it was not quite the thing for two lone women to ride around in the moonlight at midnight, but the colored boy said every one does it at Palm Beach.

MRS. DORCHESTER: It was very romantic.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: There is romance in every breeze through the palm trees.

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Gaily) I didn't come back to the hotel until morning. I stayed on and played, had breakfast there--came home without a ring on my finger--handed them over as security to a friend who thought it funny to take them--

MRS. DORCHESTER: We missed you on the beach this morning.

MRS. BLANCHARD: I slept until luncheon. I am going back tonight to win my rings again. (She dangles a gold bag stuffed with bills.) Starting with five hundred tonight.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Before you know it you will have gambled a fortune away!

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Laughs) I'm not worrying. I receive an amazingly high alimony. The court figured that I would not live long and that I needed much medical care. Well, I am not paying out any money for medical care and when it comes to having a good time I am making up for forty years! I found only one man in my whole life whom I really loved and he was not my husband. (Hastily) Be shocked if you want to--I am free now and can speak of it.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: What happened?

MRS. BLANCHARD: I have never known what became of him.

MRS. DORCHESTER: I can't imagine what it must be not to love one's husband. I miss mine so!

MRS. BLANCHARD: I had been married only four months when I heard of my husband's infatuation for a married woman in our own set. He had married me only, it seems, to allay suspicion. Of course, I see now that I should have divorced him then and there, but I was very young and it wasn't being done in those days. I those hours of my disillusion a dashing young lieutenant understood my despair and planned to arouse my husband's jealousy and so bring him back to me--

MRS. DORCHESTER: Phoebe, stop fuddling with your door-key. It gets on my nerves.

MRS. BLANCHARD: He succeeded in arousing my husband's jealousy but meanwhile I had fallen in love with the lieutenant--

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: And he with you no doubt?

MRS. BLANCHARD: Yes.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Mrs. Blanchard, it is a life-tragedy, but not a line of it shows in your face.

MRS. BLANCHARD: I wouldn't let it show in my face. I harbored a secret thought--a terrible thought that my husband might die, that I might be free to find the other again, that then he should not see an old wrinkled face after he had cherished the memory of my youth.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Think of living like that all these years when you might have had a divorce long ago.

MRS. BLANCHARD: It's humorous in a way, isn't it? That when women like you and Mrs. Dorchester are widowed, I had to put up with a husband who just wouldn't die?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: What became of the lieutenant?

MRS. BLANCHARD: He asked to be transferred to another post. He wanted to go as far away from me as possible--no distance seemed far enough to break the magnetic attraction between us. Finally he was sent as far away as China, and there we lost track of him in the Boxer rebellion.

MRS. DORCHESTER: And you never heard from him again?

MRS. BLANCHARD: No. The Government reported him as missing. No doubt the Chinese took him prisoner. If he died--and I think he must have died--all these years I have imagined that he died--I have felt his spirit near me--guiding me--watching over me--

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Shaking her head) Do you believe he could be near you? I don't believe that my husband is. I sit and knit and think of him, but the beyond seems nothing but void and silence.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Practically) Well, I believe in believing anything that helps you.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Shaking head) I can't get into communication.

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Hopefully) Oh! I know Oliver Trent has never forgotten me. If he had lived or escaped, Oliver would have found me. I know Oliver died and that his spirit has been lovingly near me these twenty years!

MRS. DORCHESTER: My husband and I loved each other deeply. That love, it seems to me, should hold us together even after he has gone, but I can't believe that it does.

MRS. BLANCHARD: It does and it will, if you have faith. There is nothing but love--I am beginning to feel it--for a long while I tried to make myself believe it--for a long while I could only think, but now I am beginning to feel it--deep within me to realize it!--and I feel warm all through. Oh, I shall put aside my ancient legs! (She flings the cane aside.)

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Of course, he loved you--I am sure he did.

MRS. DORCHESTER: If he were only alive now that you have your divorce.

MRS. BLANCHARD: So you see my romance is only a shadow--only a thought--there is nothing tangible--I dared keep no letters, not one single token of his--only my thoughts, but those thoughts have kept me from going to pieces all these years.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: And the thoughts have kept your face so young.

MRS. BLANCHARD: I would not let me face change--if by some miracle I should see him again I must be as he remembered me--but I couldn't control my body as well--I seemed to get wearier and wearier of life until I needed a cane to lean on--and then I doubled up on that and here I am--

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: And here you are threatening to walk without it.

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Brightening) I will too, I will. I only sadden when I begin to think of the past. It's a bad habit. I shall not do it any more. Only if I could be sure he died with me in his heart, I wouldn't mind so much his not being alive. If I knew that all these years it has been he guiding me and not my imagination and self-deception, that he is near me all the time--if I could but know that.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: I should certainly continue to believe that he remembered me.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Consolingly) I am sure he did.

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Shakes her head) I built my life upon my faith in him--if I should be robbed of this belief in his love for me--I think it would--kill me.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: But if you could have proof of his love--

MRS. BLANCHARD: (With shining eyes) Oh! If I could have proof.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Looking off stage) There's that beautiful Mrs. Courtney-Page. I should like to know her better. Shall we invite her to sit with us?

MRS. BLANCHARD: Who is she?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: The white-haired woman in white velvet carrying a black fan. She is just coming out of mourning for her last husband.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Last! How many did she have?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: The manicurist told me she had three--and the clerk in the jewel shop told me only one, they were appraising her pearls--she had such marvelous pearls--I'd love to see her pearls close by--wouldn't you?

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Amused) Oh! yes, do invite her over--I'd like to exchange data about husbands. Is she down here alone?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: They say she came alone--but I've noticed her on the beach with one man, and in a wheel-chair with another--she's alone now though and evidently looking for a place to sit--call her over, Agnes.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Timidly) But I don't know her. Phoebe, you call her.

MRS. BLANCHARD: Don't you know her, Mrs. Payne-Dexter?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: I might pretend to. How do you do. (She bows amiably.)

[MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE enters from right. She is white-haired and

about sixty, but she has a dash in her manner and her figure is stunning in a white velvet evening gown. She is the type that can be a vampire at any age. The gown has the medieval charm of long sleeves although it is very low at the throat. Her jewels are pearls, ropes of pearls. She carries a black feather fan, a black velvet bag, and a batch of mail among which is a black rimmed letter.]

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: How do you do--You must pardon me, I don't recall the name?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Mrs. Payne Dexter, of New York. Don't tell me, Mrs. Courtney-Page, that you have forgotten me.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: (With poise) Oh! yes--Mrs. Payne-Dexter--a name so well known--we met, I remember, exactly five years ago at the opera. Your box was next to the Carrolls'. We were their guests one evening when my late husband and I were in New York on a wedding trip.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Why, yes, of course, how clever of you to remember. My friends, Mrs. Dorchester, Mrs. Blanchard--

MRS. BLANCHARD: How do you do--won't you sit down?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Yes, thank you. (She sits.) I have noticed you, Mrs. Blanchard. Your cane? (She picks it up and courteously hands it to MRS. BLANCHARD.)

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Courteously taking it as an evidence of courteous consideration) Thank you.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Mrs. Dorchester and I have been spending the season in Palm Beach. Mrs. Dorchester is a native of Long Island.

MRS. BLANCHARD: And I came down from St. Louis and had the good fortune to become acquainted with them, personally. I have always known Mrs. Payne-Dexter by reputation.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Blanchard of St. Louis. The name is familiar--

MRS. BLANCHARD: My daughter married the Duke of Caubreigh--

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Oh! yes--yes--but just lately--it seems to me I saw that name lately.

MRS. BLANCHARD: No doubt you did. I am celebrating my divorce!

MRS. DORCHESTER: I think she has a great deal of courage to face the world alone--voluntarily.

MRS. BLANCHARD: It is rejuvenating to feel so marvelously free.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: She is quite right. Why should a woman remain in bondage when there is at every turn a new chance for a better alliance!

MRS. BLANCHARD: Good gracious! Do you believe me capable of marrying again at my age?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Why not? A woman can marry any man she wants.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Mildly) Oh! The man may get the woman he wants, Henry kept insisting until I married him, but I don't think it's the other way round; do you, Phoebe?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Dominating manner) I don't know. I worked very hard for Thomas but I got him.

MRS. BLANCHARD: I haven't any opinion. The one I wanted I met only when it was too late.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: What do you mean by too late?

MRS. BLANCHARD: After I was married to someone else.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: But now you are divorced--

MRS. BLANCHARD: Oh! it's too late now. My romance was over twenty years ago.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Do you really think a woman can marry any man she wants?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: I've proved it. I was engaged three times, married once, once widowed, and now I have another fiancé. Isn't that proof?

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Suavely) You are, if you will pardon my frankness, a very handsome woman, Mrs. Courtney-Page. Such attractions would not require much further effort on your part.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Thank you, but there is a science about attracting love as there is about everything else. There hasn't been a moment in my life when I haven't been in love.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Rather snortingly) That's impossible! There aren't enough people in the world for that!

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: (With real tenderness) Oh! yes there are--as long as you hold the thought of love, you will find those you can love--and as long as you love it will attract it in return.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Where is your home now, Mrs. Courtney-Page.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Chicago, but I was born in San Francisco. I was Emily Tardon.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Emily Tardon! You don't mean it! Are you truly! Why, it just seems yesterday when all the magazines were full of your photographs, the most beautiful débutante on the western coast!

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: They did make a fuss about it when I became engaged to Harlow Bingham--I was only eighteen then. When I look back and think what a brilliant career I might have had with Harlow--well--you know he died--(she sighs)--before we were married--an accident--horse-racing. Poor Harlow, he gave me my first pearls. (She unconsciously plays with a strand of pearls.)

MRS. BLANCHARD: Magnificent pearls!

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Using lorgnette) I have scarcely been able to keep my eyes off of them.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: This strand--the shortest and smallest--was given to me by Harlow Bingham upon our engagement. He gave me a solitaire too, but the pearls were a gift of thanks because I had given up the desire to go on the stage to marry him.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Oh, did you want to be an actress?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: I have wanted nothing more all of my life.

MRS. BLANCHARD: You would have made a good one too.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: My family opposed me as all families do.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: They did in those days.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: So I had to give up the idea of acting on the stage. (But it is evident that she has been acting in real life ever since.)

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (In a whisper, looking down right) Look, look, that's the man who tried to flirt with me the other day at the tea dance in the Grove.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Don't you know who that is?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: No.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: That's Beverly Strawn, our best seller novelist.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Gracious! Hide me! He must have been picking me out for the dowager mother-in-law in his next novel--

MRS. DORCHESTER: Did you marry Mr. Courtney-Page after MR.-- what's his name died-- Your first fiancé?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: No. I became engaged to Philip Harlow, an Englishman I met in Egypt. He was on his way to South Africa. He had been in diplomatic service in India and had been transferred. He brought me this second strand--the second largest and longest--from India. He went ahead to South Africa to prepare a home intending to come back for me, but he died of fever--and we--were never married.

MRS. BLANCHARD: How thrillingly tragic!

MRS. DORCHESTER: I could not have endured it.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: And the other strands--you have two more--

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: This third one was the gift of my husband, Mr. Courtney-Page. I would not let him give them to me until after we were married.

MRS. DORCHESTER: That was a wise precaution. They say pearls mean tears.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: It is surprising that he risked giving you pearls at all.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: He felt he had to because he was jealous of the others--of course, I couldn't throw the others away--they were so beautiful and so costly--

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Naturally not.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: So he finally purchased a strand in Vienna--larger and longer than the other.

MRS. BLANCHARD: And then did he die too?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Oh! no, Mr. Courtney-Page was the third man I was engaged to, but the only one I married. He died scarcely a year ago.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Takes some digestive tablets out of her bag and offers them) Will you have a life-preserver? I ate something tonight that didn't quite agree with me. (She takes one.)

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Takes one) Thank you.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Offering) Mrs. Blanchard?

MRS. BLANCHARD: No, thanks, I don't need them any more since I am taking the new diet.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: What is your new diet?

[MRS. DORCHESTER silently offers MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE, who takes one.]

MRS. BLANCHARD: Nuts, fruit, no meat, no bread, no hot vegetables, no coffee, no tea--

MRS. DORCHESTER: Have you stopped eating altogether?

MRS. BLANCHARD: Only fruit and nuts--I feel as light as a feather--in another day I shall walk and throw away this stick!

MRS. DORCHESTER: You said in another week you would throw it away.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Now be careful, don't take risks!

MRS. BLANCHARD: The book says we must not have negatives in our mind. I tell you that if I can have enough faith I shall walk alone!

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Oh! the book.

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Handing book to MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER)
Truth and Youth.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Reading from book at random) "The average man and woman of middle age chooses a comfortable chair and settles down into it with the thought that life is finished and it is necessary to await the end. Women do this more than men. When women see their little children grown to manhood and independent of them, they feel that their use in life is over. Nothing is more untrue. The grandmother is a free--"

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Interrupting as she glances off down left) Just a moment, Phoebe, excuse me, but what did you say was the name of the woman in jet--walking with the aviator--did she fly down with him from New York?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: That's Hilda Dane, one of the Follies. They say she has her skin insured when she's on the beach.

MRS. BLANCHARD: I have never seen her skin. She paints it up with whitewash and her lips are thick with red paint. Yesterday on the beach she wore a lemon colored woolen cape with a big sable collar and every diamond that has ever been given to her.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Is she married to the aviator?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Going back to her book) Don't ask absurd questions, Agnes. "The grandmother is a free woman, she has a new youth. She has the vision of experience with which to experiment for greater wisdom--" Ah, Agnes, you must read this book--it will stir you up--your very mind is getting to be like wool.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Amused) I have always been more domestic

than you, Phoebe.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Domestic! Haven't I done my share? Haven't I run a house in New York, a house in Newport, a house in London, apartments in Paris, I even had a palace one season in Venice--no, it is not domesticity that is making you old, it is mental lethargy.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: That is the worst enemy to youth, mental lethargy, I refust to have it!

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Mrs. Dorchester doesn't live for herself anymore. When she is at home, she is a slave to her grandchildren, when she is away she can scarcely take time from the wool to look at a coconut grove.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Looking away) Oh, I can knit without looking.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: I am more selfish. I let my children and grandchildren alone. As long as they are not starving, it is no business of mine to live for them. I do not spend my evenings knitting baby socks. I have my opera box, I give dinner parties and entertain distinguished foreign visitors. I have my club committees, my charities, and I am studying art so as to be able to add to my husband's collection of paintings--as a memorial to him--and I am taking up Spanish because I am planning to spend next season in Buenos Aires. But you, Agnes, you make your children dependent upon you--you are always nursing some grandchild through something.

MRS. DORCHESTER: But, when they are ill, I must help them.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: You think you must and they let you think it because they don't want to hurt your feelings by letting you know they don't need you. You take care of a grandchild so its own mother can go and play bridge, you save your son a nurse's bill while he spends the money playing polo at the country club.

MRS. DORCHESTER: But it isn't a happy thought not to be needed.

MRS. BLANCHARD: You were telling us about your pearls, Mrs. Courtney-Page. It is an exquisite pleasure to look at them.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: This fourth strand, the largest and longest, is the gift of my new fiancé. I am down here waiting for time to pass-- we shall be married as soon as it seems correct.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Dear me (She looks off down left), there's Mrs. Wallace Morse in another gown--and as usual no petticoat.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Well, I think she does wear one!

MRS. BLANCHARD: Aren't you lucky to find a fiancé again! I am afraid I couldn't bring myself to care for any man as much as I have cared for one in the past.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Nor I.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Hump! Men aren't worth bothering about.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: I was so lost without marriage companionship that when I was in Paris last autumn, I picked out the most eligible man I could find. He is quite old, but very nice and has valuable mines in Australia.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Is he a Frenchman?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: No, an American, but he hasn't been in this country since he was sent to the American Legation in China. He has had an exciting life. He was taken prisoner in the Boxer rebellion and was reported missing for years, but a faithful Chinese servant smuggled him to Australia.

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Begins to tremble with premonition--her hands quiver as they clutch her cane) Your fiancé, his name--

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Oliver Trent--president of the Australia Mining Company of--

[With a gasp of anguish, MRS. BLANCHARD looses her hold on the cane; it falls unheeded to the floor.]

MRS. BLANCHARD: Oliver Trent--you said Oliver Trent?

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Blandly) Why--wasn't that the name of the man you loved--wasn't that the name, Phoebe?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: The man, Mrs. Blanchard--I don't understand--

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Trying to relieve the situation) Mrs. Blanchard had been telling us about a friend of hers who had been lost in the Boxer rebellion. She thought he had died. No doubt it is a consolation to her to know that he still lives.

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Wilted and old-looking) No, Mrs. Courtney-Page, I can scarcely bear the fact that he still lives. I have held him in my heart as one dead for twenty years. I have lived on the thought that he loved me. He loved me once, but I know now that men cannot be true. When he went to China he put me out of his mind forever. He has forgotten me--for younger and handsomer women.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Hump! I wouldn't let it worry m. Men are not worth such life-long adoration. You look about and some one else--

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Gently) Perhaps, Mrs. Courtney-Page will give him up, if we tell her what he means to you.

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Fiercely) I want my own--not what is cast off--

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: (Drawing her chair closer to MRS. BLANCHARD and speaking gently) You want me to give him up? (She fondles the largest strand of pearls reluctantly.) It would be hard for me to do--It wasn't easy to win him. I had to use all the art I have learned in past experiences to get him. He has never been married and is a little afraid--but I won him--if I give him up, are you sure he would

remember you?

MRS. BLANCHARD: (In anguish of spirit but under control) No. Do not trouble. I shall have to bear it. I--I feel quite blind--as if I had been struck on the head--but maybe it is just my heart. You see he and I were very much in love, but I was married and he had to go away. He promised not to forget. But he was young and--and maybe I shouldn't have believed him. When I never heard again and the Government reported him missing, every one said he must be dead. That last day before he went, I met him clandestinely in the Park. I cut off a bit of my hair that day. It was golden then, like golden amber he said, and he put it into an amber locket he wore on his watch charm.

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Drops her knitting needles and lets her wool roll to the floor) I remember, I remember, amber locket--from a watch charm--I have it here--I've had it twenty years--made into a bracelet (She takes off bracelet). My son brought it home from the Philippines--it was given to him by a Chinese servant--

MRS. BLANCHARD: (In extreme excitement) The locket--

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: A Chinese servant--

MRS. DORCHESTER: Yes, the very one you said rescued him. I remember it all now. How stupid of me not to think of it before, but as Phoebe says, my mind's all wool--that Chinese servant--

MRS. BLANCHARD: Yes--yes--go on!

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Speedily) You know the Boxers stormed the Legation--he fought desperately and valiantly, the Chinese servant described all that--how he was taken prisoner and tortured so he almost lost his mind. At night he raved in delirium. He called a woman's name, but there was no one of that name in the Legation--my son told me but I have such a wretched memory for names--but it wasn't a real name that one could identify--it must have been a nickname--

MRS. BLANCHARD: Was it Dee-dee?

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Pouncingly) Dee-dee, Dee-dee, that's what it was! Oh! my stupid head!

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Pathetically) It meant "dear."

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Lovingly at MRS. DORCHESTER with increasing suspense) Why have you kept this from us all this time?

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Gaining assurance) How could I know my son's story was about Mrs. Blanchard until she mentioned the watch charm?--but now it all comes back to me--at night in delirium he called this name--how he loved this woman--he took the watch charm and opened it and kissed the blonde lock of hair, and he treasured it as nothing else he had. He treasured it so highly that he gave it to his Chinese servant to keep for him--for fear they would rob him of it. They took his money and everything else he had but the servant kept the amber safely--but--but--

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Wrapt attention) But then how did you forget it?

MRS. DORCHESTER: That's just it--I'll tell you how it was--Oh! my stupid memory. Phoebe, stop fiddling with your door key, you distract me-- The amber--the Chinese servant smuggled him into a boat--

MRS. BLANCHARD: Who was smuggled into the boat?

MRS. DORCHESTER: Mr. What's his name--your--

MRS. BLANCHARD: Oliver Trent--

MRS. DORCHESTER: Yes, into the boat--and in the excitement of concealing him behind some kegs--the ship began to move and the Chinese servant had to run to get off and in running he forgot to give up the amber watch charm--and so he kept it--he kept it as a talisman and a few years later when he served my son in the Philippines, he gave it to him as a talisman when my son was very ill with fever--and my son

became superstitious about it and had it set into a bracelet for me as my protection--now, I shall give it to you--for it is your talisman, Mrs. Blanchard, a talisman of his undying love.

[MRS. BLANCHARD is incapable of speech, but she takes the bracelet in both hands and raises it to her lips; a light of inspiration comes into her eyes.]

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: And that is why I had such difficulty in making him care for me. He told me about his first love--he spoke of her as Dee-dee and he told me that when he lost the amber--he felt that she had gone out of his life forever--he said that she was married and it was unlawful for him to think of her--but he has never forgotten--he told me he would love her always--and when I tell him of you, Mrs. Blanchard, he will come to you at once, for you have been right--his love has been yours and is yours still. I think you ought to have these pearls.

MRS. BLANCHARD: (Her eyes illumined, her body stronger) Oh! no, thank you--I don't want them--I--I--have this. (She holds the locket in her two hands and rises; forgetting her cane.) Excuse me, ladies, if I go to my room--I--I have had my answer out of the silence--and I'm a little--unstrung.

[She walks out right with great dignity and composure, a grand dame in manner even in her ecstasy and the light in her eyes is a triumph of youth.]

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (Looking after her in awe) Without her cane!

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Don't remind her!

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Sighing) Poor dear--poor dear--

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Was that all true what you said, Agnes? I never heard you talk so fast in all your life--and how you suddenly got such memory! You never told me anything about that amber charm and you've worn it forever, seems to me!

MRS. DORCHESTER: Father gave it to me my twenty-first birthday to save a lock of my blonde hair. I risked the chance that mine was a duplicate of hers.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: And all you said was a lie?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: It doesn't matter. We shall make it come true.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: But when she finds out that you have deceived her--

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: She will never find out. I shall warn him to hide away his amber watch charm.

MRS. DORCHESTER: Does he still wear it?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Yes; and many other charms, from other loves--they say he has been a great beau--

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: The outrageous flirt!

MRS. DORCHESTER: Poor dear Mrs. Blanchard. I thought she would die--I was afraid she was dying--I had to say something to bring her to.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: But what have you gained by these lies?

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Does she not walk?

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: (With awe) Yes, it is a miracle.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Merely a miracle of the realization of love--

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: But it is built on a false belief. He has not been true to her.

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Mrs. Payne-Dexter, I have never questioned the reality of any one's love for me. That which counts is, after all, only that which is in our own hearts. If Mrs. Blanchard is convinced of his love--that is all that is really necessary.

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: But when you marry him--

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: I shall not marry him--I shall only keep the pearls--

MRS. DORCHESTER: But if you love him--

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: Well as for that--I always can find someone else--

MRS. DORCHESTER: Gracious, my wool is a mess!

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: You'd better give up knitting, Agnes, and turn to story-writing--you've quite surprised me with your sudden brilliance. Bell-boy, you may have these glasses--

MRS. DORCHESTER: Your diamond, platinum lorgnette!

MRS. PAYNE-DEXTER: Hump! Do you think I have to manufacture a love-affair to help me get rid of my glasses?

MRS. DORCHESTER: (Scarcely able to grasp the idea) She walked without her cane!

MRS. COURTNEY-PAGE: (With a sentimental smile) Oh! To stay young, one must love.

CURTAIN

http://www.one-act-plays.com/dramas/ever_young.html

EXCLUDED MIDDLE

by Edgar Lee Masters

from The Project Gutenberg EBook #7845 of *Toward the Gulf*

Out of the mercury shimmer of glass
Over these daguerreotypes
The balloon-like spread of a skirt of silk emerges
With its little figure of flowers.
And the enameled glair of parted hair
Lies over the oval brow,
From under which eyes of fiery blackness
Look through you.
And the only repose of spirit shown
Is in the hands
Lying loosely one in the other,
Lightly clasped somewhat below the breast. ...
And in the companion folder of this case
Of gutta percha
Is the shape of a man.
His brow is oval too, but broader.
His nose is long, but thick at the tip.
His eyes are blue
Wherein faith burns her signal lights,
And flashes her convictions.
His mouth is tense, almost a slit.
And his face is a massive Calvinism
Resting on a stock tie.

They were married, you see.
The clasp on this gutta percha case
Locks them together.
They were locked together in life.
And a hasp of brass
Keeps their shadows face to face in the case
Which has been handed down--
(The pictures of noble ancestors,
Showing what strains of gentle blood

Flow in the third generation)--
From Massachusetts to Illinois. ...

Long ago it was over for them,
Massachusetts has done its part,
She raised the seed
And a wind blew it over to Illinois
Where it has mixed, multiplied, mutated
Until one soul comes forth:
But a soul all striped and streaked,
And a soul self-crossed and self-opposed,
As it were a tree which on one branch
Bears northern spies,
And on another thorn apples. ...

Come Weissmann, Von Baer and Schleiden,
And you Buffon and De Vries,
Come with your secrets of sea shore asters
Night-shade, henbanes, gloxinias,
Veronicas, snap-dragons, Danebrog,
And show us how they cross and change,
And become hybrids.
And show us what heredity is,
And how it works.
For the secret of these human beings
Locked in this gutta serena case
Is the secret of Mephistos and red Campions.

Let us lay out the facts as far as we can.
Her eyes were black,
His eyes were blue.
She saw through shadows, walls and doors,
She knew life and hungered for more.
But he lived in the mists, and climbed to high places
To feel clouds about his face, and get the lights
Of supernal sun-sets.
She was reason, and he was faith.
She had an illumination, but of the intellect.

And he had an illumination but of the soul.
And she saw God as merciless law,
And he knew God as divine love.
And she was a man, and he in part was a woman.
He stood in a pulpit and preached the Christ,
And the remission of sins by blood,
And the literal fall of man through Adam,
And the mystical and actual salvation of man
Through the coming of Christ.

And she sat in a pew shading her great eyes
To hide her scorn for it all.
She was crucified,
And raged to the last like the impenitent thief
Against the fate which wasted and trampled down
Her wisdom, sagacity, versatile skill,
Which would have piled up gold or honors
For a mate who knew that life is growth,
And health, and the satisfaction of wants,
And place and reputation and mansion houses,
And mahogany and silver,
And beautiful living.
She hated him, and hence she pitied him.
She was like the gardener with great pruners
Deciding to clip, sometimes not clipping
Just for the dread.
She had married him--but why?
Some inscrutable air
Wafted his pollen to her across a wide garden--
Some power had crossed them.
And here is the secret I think:
(As we would say here is electricity)
It is the vibration inhering in sex
That produces devils or angels,
And it is the sex reaction in men and women
That brings forth devils or angels,
And starts in them the germs of powers or passions,
Becoming loves, ferocities, gifts and weaknesses,

Till the stock dies out.
So now for their hybrid children:--
She gave birth to four daughters and one son.

But first what have we for the composition of these daughters?
Reason opposed and becoming keener therefor.
Faith mocked and drawing its mantel closer.
Love thwarted and becoming acid.
Hatred mounting too high and thinning into pity.
Hunger for life unappeased and becoming a stream under-ground
Where only blind things swim.
God year by year removing himself to remoter thrones
Of inexorable law.
God coming closer even while disease
And total blindness came between him and God
And defeated the mercy of God.
And a love and a trust growing deeper in him
As she in great thirst, hanging on the cross,
Mocked his crucifixion,
And talked philosophy between the spasms of pain,
Till at last she is all satirist,
And he is all saint.

And all the children were raised
After the strictest fashion in New England,
And made to join the church,
And attend its services.
And these were the children:

Janet was a religious fanatic and a virago,
She debated religion with her husband for ten years,
Then he refused to talk, and for twenty years
Scarcely spoke to her.
She died a convert to Catholicism.
They had two children:
The boy became a forgerer
Of notorious skill.
The daughter married, but was barren.

Miranda married a rich man
And spent his money so fast that he failed.
She lashed him with a scorpion tongue
And made him believe at last
With her incessant reasonings
That he was a fool, and so had failed.
In middle life he started over again,
But became tangled in a law-suit.
Because of these things he killed himself.

Louise was a nymphomaniac.
She was married twice.
Both husbands fled from her insatiable embraces.
At thirty-two she became a woman on a telephone list,
Subject to be called,
And for two years ran through a daily orgy of sex,
When blindness came on her, as it came on her father before her,
And she became a Christian Scientist,
And led an exemplary life.

Deborah was a Puritan of Puritans,
Her list of unmentionable things
Tabooed all the secrets of creation,
Leaving politics, religion, and human faults,
And the mistakes most people make,
And the natural depravity of man,
And his freedom to redeem himself if he chooses,
As the only subjects of conversation.
As a twister of words and meanings,
And a skilled welder of fallacies,
And a swift emerger from ineluctable traps of logic,
And a wit with an adder's tongue,
And a laugher,
And an unafraid facer of enemies,
Oppositions, hatreds,
She never knew her equal.
She was at once very cruel, and very tender,

Very selfish and very generous
Very little and very magnanimous.
Scrupulous as to the truth, and utterly disregardless of the truth.

Of the keenest intuitions, yet gullible,
Easily used at times, of erratic judgment,
Analytic but pursuing with incredible swiftness
The falsest trails to her own undoing--
All in all the strangest mixture of colors and scent
Derived from father and mother,
But mixed by whom, and how, and why?

Now for the son named Herman, rebel soul.
His brow was like a loaf of bread, his eyes
Turned from his father's blue to gray, his nose
Was like his mother's, skin was dark like hers.
His shapely body, hands and feet belonged
To some patrician face, not to Marat's.
And his was like Marat's, fanatical,
Materialistic, fierce, as it might guide
A reptile's crawl, but yet he crawled to peaks
Loving the hues of mists, but not the mists
His father loved. And being a rebel soul
He thought the world all wrong. A nothingness
Moving as malice marred the life of man.
'Twas man's great work to fight this Giant Fraud,
And all who praise and serve Him. 'Tis for man
To free the world from error, suffer, die
For liberty of thought. You see his mother
Is in possession of one part of him,
Or all of him for some time.

So he lives
Nursing the dream (like father he's a dreamer)
That genius fires him. All the while a gift
For analytics stored behind that brow,
That bulges like a loaf of bread, is all
Of which he well may boast above the man

He hates as but a slave of faith and fear.
He feeds luxurious doubt with Omar Khyam,
But for long years neglects the jug of wine.
And as for "thou" he does not wake for years,
Is a pure maiden when he weds, the grains
Run counter in him, end in knots at times.
He takes from father certain tastes and traits,
From mother certain others, one can see
His mother's sex re-actions to his father,
Not passed to him to make him celibate,
But holding back in sleeping passions which
Burst over bounds at last in lust, not love.
Not love since that great engine in the brow
Tears off the irised wings of love and bares
The poor worm's body where the wings had been:
What is it but desire? Such stuff in rhyme
In music over what is but desire,
And ends when that is satisfied!

He's a crank.
And follows all the psychic thrills which run
To cackles o'er the world. It's Looking Backward,
Or Robert Elsmere, Spencer's Social Statics,
It's socialism, Anarchism, Peace,
It's non-resistance with a swelling heart,
As who should say how truer to the faith
Of Jesus am I, without hope or faith,
Than churchmen. He's a prohibitionist,
The poor's protagonist, the knight at arms
Of fallen women, yelling at the rich
Whose wicked greed makes all the prostitutes--
No prostitutes without the wicked rich!
But as he ages, as the bitter days
Approach with perorations: O ye vipers,
The engine in him changes all the world,
Reverses all the wheels of thought behind.
For Nietzsche comes, and makes him superman.
He dumps the truth of Jesus over--there

It lies with his youth's textual skepticism,
And laughter at the supernatural.

Now what's the motivating principle
Of such a mind? In youth he sought for rules
Wherewith to trail and capture truths. He found it
In James McCosh's Logic, it was this:
Lex Exclusi Tertii aut Medii,
Law of Excluded Middle speaking plain:
A thing is true, or not true, never a third
Hypothesis, so God is or is not.
That's very good to start with, how to end
And how to know which of the two is false--
He hunted out the false, as mother did--
Requires a tool. He found it in this book,
Reductio ad absurdum; let us see
Excluded middle use reductio.
God is or God is not, but then what God?
Excluded Middle never sought a God
To suffer demolition at his hands
Except the God of Illinois, the God
Grown but a little with his followers
Since Moses lived and Peter fished. So now
God is or God is not. Let us assume
God is and use reductio ad absurdum,
Taking away the rotten props, the posts
That do not fit or hold, and let Him fall.
For if he falls, the other postulate
That God is not is demonstrated. See
A universe of truth pass on the way
Cleared by Excluded Middle through the stuff
Of thought and visible things, a way that lets
A greater God escape, uncaught by all
The nippers of reductio ad absurdum.
But to resume his argument was this:
God is or God is not, but if God is
Why pestilence and war, earthquake and famine?
He either wills them, or cannot prevent them,

But if he wills them God is evil, if
He can't prevent them, he is limited.

But God, you say, is good, omnipotent,
And here I prove Him evil, or too weak
To stay the evil. Having shown your God
Lacking in what makes God, the proposition
Which I oppose to this, that God is not
Stands proven. For as evil is most clear
In sickness, pain and death, it cannot be
There is a Power with strength to overcome them,
Yet suffers them to be.

And so this man
Went through the years of life, and stripped the fields
Of beauty and of thought with mandibles
Insatiable as the locust's, which devours
A season's care and labor in an hour.
He stripped these fields and ate them, but they made
No meat or fat for him. And so he lived
On his own thought, as starving men may live
On stored up fat. And so in time he starved.
The thought in him no longer fed his life,
And he had withered up the outer world
Of man and nature, stripped it to the bone,
Nothing but skull and cross-bones greeted him
Wherever he turned--the world became a bottle
Filled with a bitter essence he could drink
From long accustomed doses--labeled poison
And marked with skull and cross-bones. Could he laugh
As mother laughed? No more! He tried to find
The mother's laugh and secret for the laugh
Which kept her to the end--but did she laugh?
Or if she laughed, was it so hollow, forced
As all his laughter now was. He had proved
Too much for laughter. Nothing but himself
Remained to keep himself, he lived alone
Upon his stored up fat, now daily growing

To dangerous thinness.

So with love of woman.
He had found "thou" the jug of wine as well,
"Thou" "thou" had come and gone too many times.
For what is sex but touch of flesh, the hand
Is flesh and hands may touch, if so, the loins--
Reductio ad absurdum, O you fools,
Who see a wrong in touch of loins, no wrong
In clasp of hands. And so again, again
With his own tools of thought he bruised his hands
Until they grew too callous to perceive
When they were touched.

So by analysis
He turned on everything he once believed.
Let's make an end!

Men thought Excluded Middle
Was born for great things. Why that bulging brow
And analytic keen if not for greatness?

In those old days they thought so when he fought
For lofty things, a youthful radical
Come here to change the world! But now at last
He lectures in back halls to youths who are
What he was in his youth, to acid souls
Who must have bitterness, can take enough
To kill a healthy soul, as fiends for dope
Must have enough to kill a body clean.
And so upon a night Excluded Middle
Is lecturing to prove that life is evil,
Not worth the living--when his auditors
Behold him pale and sway and take his seat,
And later quit the hall, the lecture left
Half finished.

This had happened in a twinkling:

He had made life a punching bag, with fists,
Excluded Middle and Reductio,
Had whacked it back and forth. But just as often
As he had struck it with an argument
That it is not worth living, snap, the bag
Would fly back for another punch. For life
Just like a punching bag will stand your whacks
Of hatred and denial, let you punch
Almost at will. But sometime, like the bag,
The strap gives way, the bag flies up and falls
And lies upon the floor, you've knocked it out.
And this is what Excluded Middle does
This night, the strap breaks with his blows. He proves
His strength, his case and for the first he sees
Life is not worth the living. Life gives up,
Resists no more, flies back no more to him,
But hits the ceiling, snap the strap gives way!
The bag falls to the floor, and lies there still--
Who now shall pick it up, re-fasten it?
And so his color fades, it well may be
The crisis of a long neurosis, well
What caused it? But his eyes are wondrous clear
Perceiving life knocked out. His heart is sick,
He takes his seat, admiring friends swarm round him,
Conduct him to a carriage, he goes home
And sitting by the fire (O what is fire?
The miracle of fire dawns on his thought,
Fire has been near him all these years unseen,
How wonderful is fire!) which warms and soothes
Neuritic pains, he takes the rubber case
Which locks the images of father, mother.
And as he stares upon the oval brow,
The eyes of blue which flash the light of faith,
Preserved like dendrites in this silver shimmer,
Some spectral speculations fill his brain,
Float like a storm above the sorry wreck
Of all his logic tools, machines; for now
Since pains in back and shoulder like to father's

Fall to him at the age that father had them,
Father has entered him, has settled down
To live with him with those neuritic pangs.
Thus are his speculations. Over all
How comes it that a sudden feel of life,
Its wonder, terror, beauty is like father's?
As if the soul of father entered in him
And made the field of consciousness his own,
Emotions, powers of thought his instruments.
That is a horrible atavism, when
You find yourself reverting to a soul
You have not loved, despite yourself becoming
That other soul, and with an out-worn self
Crying for burial on your hands, a life
Not yours till now that waits your new found powers--
Live now or die indeed!

THE ANNIVERSARY

by Anton Chekhov

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CHARACTERS

ANDREY ANDREYEVITCH SHIPUCHIN, Chairman of the N----
Joint Stock Bank, a middle-aged man, with a monocle

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA, his wife, aged 25

KUSMA NICOLAIEVITCH KHIRIN, the bank's aged book-keeper

NASTASYA FYODOROVNA MERCHUTKINA, an old woman
wearing an old-fashioned cloak

DIRECTORS OF THE BANK

EMPLOYEES OF THE BANK

The action takes place at the Bank

[The private office of the Chairman of Directors. On the left is a door, leading into the public department. There are two desks. The furniture aims at a deliberately luxurious effect, with armchairs covered in velvet, flowers, statues, carpets, and a telephone. It is midday. KHIRIN is alone; he wears long felt boots, and is shouting through the door.]

KHIRIN. Send out to the chemist for 15 copecks' worth of valerian drops,
and tell them to bring some drinking water into the Directors' office! This is the hundredth time I've asked! [Goes to a desk] I'm absolutely tired out. This is the fourth day I've been working, without a chance of shutting my eyes. From morning to evening I work here, from evening to morning at home. [Coughs] And I've got an inflammation all over me. I'm hot and cold, and I cough, and my legs ache, and there's something dancing before my eyes. [Sits] Our scoundrel of a Chairman, the brute, is going to read a report at a general meeting. "Our Bank, its Present and Future." You'd think he was a Gambetta.... [At work] Two... one... one... six... nought... seven.... Next, six... nought... one... six....

He just wants to throw dust into people's eyes, and so I sit here and work for him like a galley-slave! This report of his is poetic fiction and nothing more, and here I've got to sit day after day and add figures, devil take his soul! [Rattles on his counting-frame] I can't stand it! [Writing] That is, one... three... seven... two... one... nought.... He promised to reward me for my work. If everything goes well

to-day and the public is properly put into blinkers, he's promised me a gold charm and 300 roubles bonus.... We'll see. [Works] Yes, but if my work all goes for nothing, then you'd better look out.... I'm very excitable.... If I lose my temper I'm capable of committing some crime, so look out! Yes!

[Noise and applause behind the scenes. SHIPUCHIN'S voice: "Thank you! Thank you! I am extremely grateful." Enter SHIPUCHIN. He wears

a frockcoat and white tie; he carries an album which has been just presented to him.]

SHIPUCHIN. [At the door, addresses the outer office] This present, my dear colleagues, will be preserved to the day of my death, as a memory of the happiest days of my life! Yes, gentlemen! Once more, I thank you!

[Throws a kiss into the air and turns to KHIRIN] My dear, my respected

Kusma Nicolaievitch!

[All the time that SHIPUCHIN is on the stage, clerks intermittently come in with papers for his signature and go out.]

KHIRIN. [Standing up] I have the honour to congratulate you, Andrey Andreyevitch, on the fiftieth anniversary of our Bank, and hope that...

SHIPUCHIN. [Warmly shakes hands] Thank you, my dear sir! Thank you!

I think that in view of the unique character of the day, as it is an anniversary, we may kiss each other!... [They kiss] I am very, very

glad! Thank you for your service... for everything! If, in the course of the time during which I have had the honour to be Chairman of this Bank

anything useful has been done, the credit is due, more than to anybody else, to my colleagues. [Sighs] Yes, fifteen years! Fifteen years as my name's Shipuchin! [Changes his tone] Where's my report? Is it getting on?

KHIRIN. Yes; there's only five pages left.

SHIPUCHIN. Excellent. Then it will be ready by three?

KHIRIN. If nothing occurs to disturb me, I'll get it done. Nothing of any importance is now left.

SHIPUCHIN. Splendid. Splendid, as my name's Shipuchin! The general meeting will be at four. If you please, my dear fellow. Give me the first half, I'll peruse it.... Quick.... [Takes the report] I base enormous hopes on this report. It's my _profession de foi_, or, better still, my firework. [Note: The actual word employed.] My firework, as my name's Shipuchin! [Sits and reads the report to himself] I'm hellishly tired.... My gout kept on giving me trouble last night, all the morning I was running about, and then these excitements, ovations, agitations... I'm tired!

KHIRIN. Two... nought... nought... three... nine... two... nought. I can't see straight after all these figures.... Three... one... six... four... one... five.... [Uses the counting-frame.]

SHIPUCHIN. Another unpleasantness.... This morning your wife came to see me and complained about you once again. Said that last night you threatened her and her sister with a knife. Kusma Nicolaievitch, what do you mean by that? Oh, oh!

KHIRIN. [Rudely] As it's an anniversary, Andrey Andreyevitch, I'll ask for a special favour. Please, even if it's only out of respect for my toil, don't interfere in my family life. Please!

SHIPUCHIN. [Sighs] Yours is an impossible character, Kusma Nicolaievitch! You're an excellent and respected man, but you behave to women like some scoundrel. Yes, really. I don't understand why you hate them so?

KHIRIN. I wish I could understand why you love them so! [Pause.]

SHIPUCHIN. The employees have just presented me with an album; and the Directors, as I've heard, are going to give me an address and a silver loving-cup.... [Playing with his monocle] Very nice, as my name's Shipuchin! It isn't excessive. A certain pomp is essential to the reputation of the Bank, devil take it! You know everything, of course.... I composed the address myself, and I bought the cup myself, too.... Well, then there was 45 roubles for the cover of the address, but you can't do without that. They'd never have thought of it for themselves. [Looks round] Look at the furniture! Just look at it! They say I'm stingy, that all I want is that the locks on the doors should be polished, that the employees should wear fashionable ties, and that a fat hall-porter should stand by the door. No, no, sirs. Polished locks and a fat porter mean a good deal. I can behave as I like at home, eat and sleep like a pig, get drunk....

KHIRIN. Please don't make hints.

SHIPUCHIN. Nobody's making hints! What an impossible character yours is.... As I was saying, at home I can live like a tradesman, a parvenu, and be up to any games I like, but here everything must be en grand. This is a Bank! Here every detail must imponiren, so to speak, and have a majestic appearance. [He picks up a paper from the floor and throws it into the fireplace] My service to the Bank has been just this--I've raised its reputation. A thing of immense importance is

tone! Immense, as my name's Shipuchin! [Looks over KHIRIN] My dear man,
a deputation of shareholders may come here any moment, and there you are
in felt boots, wearing a scarf... in some absurdly coloured jacket....
You might have put on a frock-coat, or at any rate a dark jacket....

KHIRIN. My health matters more to me than your shareholders. I've an inflammation all over me.

SHIPUCHIN. [Excitedly] But you will admit that it's untidy! You spoil the _ensemble_!

KHIRIN. If the deputation comes I can go and hide myself. It won't matter if... seven... one... seven... two... one... five... nought. I don't like untidiness myself.... Seven... two... nine... [Uses the counting-frame] I can't stand untidiness! It would have been wiser of you not to have invited ladies to to-day's anniversary dinner....

SHIPUCHIN. Oh, that's nothing.

KHIRIN. I know that you're going to have the hall filled with them to-night to make a good show, but you look out, or they'll spoil everything. They cause all sorts of mischief and disorder.

SHIPUCHIN. On the contrary, feminine society elevates!

KHIRIN. Yes.... Your wife seems intelligent, but on the Monday of last week she let something off that upset me for two days. In front of a lot of people she suddenly asks: "Is it true that at our Bank my husband bought up a lot of the shares of the Driazhsky-Priazhsky Bank, which have been falling on exchange? My husband is so annoyed about it!" This
in front of people. Why do you tell them everything, I don't understand. Do you want them to get you into serious trouble?

SHIPUCHIN. Well, that's enough, enough! All that's too dull for an anniversary. Which reminds me, by the way. [Looks at the time] My

wife

ought to be here soon. I really ought to have gone to the station, to meet the poor little thing, but there's no time.... and I'm tired. I must say I'm not glad of her! That is to say, I am glad, but I'd be gladder if she only stayed another couple of days with her mother. She'll want me to spend the whole evening with her to-night, whereas we have arranged a little excursion for ourselves.... [Shivers] Oh, my nerves have already started dancing me about. They are so strained that I think the very smallest trifle would be enough to make me break into tears! No, I must be strong, as my name's Shipuchin!

[Enter TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA SHIPUCHIN in a waterproof, with a little travelling satchel slung across her shoulder.]

SHIPUCHIN. Ah! In the nick of time!

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. Darling!

[Runs to her husband: a prolonged kiss.]

SHIPUCHIN. We were only speaking of you just now! [Looks at his watch.]

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [Panting] Were you very dull without me? Are you well? I haven't been home yet, I came here straight from the station. I've a lot, a lot to tell you.... I couldn't wait.... I shan't take off my clothes, I'll only stay a minute. [To KHIRIN] Good morning, Kusma Nicolaievitch! [To her husband] Is everything all right at home?

SHIPUCHIN. Yes, quite. And, you know, you've got to look plumper and better this week.... Well, what sort of a time did you have?

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. Splendid. Mamma and Katya send their regards.

Vassili Andreitch sends you a kiss. [Kisses him] Aunt sends you a jar of jam, and is annoyed because you don't write. Zina sends you a kiss. [Kisses.] Oh, if you knew what's happened. If you only knew! I'm even frightened to tell you! Oh, if you only knew! But I see by your eyes that you're sorry I came!

SHIPUCHIN. On the contrary.... Darling.... [Kisses her.]

[KHIRIN coughs angrily.]

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. Oh, poor Katya, poor Katya! I'm so sorry for her, so sorry for her.

SHIPUCHIN. This is the Bank's anniversary to-day, darling, we may get a deputation of the shareholders at any moment, and you're not dressed.

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. Oh, yes, the anniversary! I congratulate you, gentlemen. I wish you.... So it means that to-day's the day of the meeting, the dinner.... That's good. And do you remember that beautiful address which you spent such a long time composing for the shareholders? Will it be read to-day?

[KHIRIN coughs angrily.]

SHIPUCHIN. [Confused] My dear, we don't talk about these things. You'd really better go home.

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. In a minute, in a minute. I'll tell you everything in one minute and go. I'll tell you from the very beginning. Well.... When you were seeing me off, you remember I was sitting next to that stout lady, and I began to read. I don't like to talk in the train. I read for three stations and didn't say a word to anyone.... Well, then

the evening set in, and I felt so mournful, you know, with such sad thoughts! A young man was sitting opposite me--not a bad-looking fellow,
a brunette.... Well, we fell into conversation.... A sailor came along then, then some student or other.... [Laughs] I told them that I wasn't married... and they did look after me! We chattered till midnight, the brunette kept on telling the most awfully funny stories, and the sailor kept on singing. My chest began to ache from laughing. And when the sailor--oh, those sailors!--when he got to know my name was TATIANA, you
know what he sang? [Sings in a bass voice] "Onegin don't let me conceal
it, I love Tatiana madly!" [Note: From the Opera _Evgeni Onegin_ -- words
by Pushkin.] [Roars with laughter.]

[KHIRIN coughs angrily.]

SHIPUCHIN. Tania, dear, you're disturbing Kusma Nicolaievitch. Go home,
dear.... Later on....

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. No, no, let him hear if he wants to, it's awfully
interesting. I'll end in a minute. Serezha came to meet me at the station. Some young man or other turns up, an inspector of taxes, I think... quite handsome, especially his eyes.... Serezha introduced me, and the three of us rode off together.... It was lovely weather....

[Voices behind the stage: "You can't, you can't! What do you want?"
Enter MERCHUTKINA, waving her arms about.]

MERCHUTKINA. What are you dragging at me for. What else! I want him
himself! [To SHIPUCHIN] I have the honour, your excellency... I am the
wife of a civil servant, Nastasya Fyodorovna Merchutkina.

SHIPUCHIN. What do you want?

MERCHUTKINA. Well, you see, your excellency, my husband has been ill for five months, and while he was at home, getting better, he was suddenly dismissed for no reason, your excellency, and when I went to get his salary, they, you see, deducted 24 roubles 36 copecks from it. What for? I ask. They said, "Well, he drew it from the employees' account, and the others had to make it up." How can that be? How could he draw anything without my permission? No, your excellency! I'm a poor woman... my lodgers are all I have to live on.... I'm weak and defenceless.... Everybody does me some harm, and nobody has a kind word for me.

SHIPUCHIN. Excuse me. [Takes a petition from her and reads it standing.]

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [To KHIRIN] Yes, but first we.... Last week I suddenly received a letter from my mother. She writes that a certain Grendilevsky has proposed to my sister Katya. A nice, modest, young man, but with no means of his own, and no assured position. And, unfortunately, just think of it, Katya is absolutely gone on him. What's to be done? Mamma writes telling me to come at once and influence Katya....

KHIRIN. [Angrily] Excuse me, you've made me lose my place! You go talking about your mamma and Katya, and I understand nothing; and I've lost my place.

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. What does that matter? You listen when a lady is talking to you! Why are you so angry to-day? Are you in love? [Laughs.]

SHIPUCHIN. [To MERCHUTKINA] Excuse me, but what is this? I

can't make
head or tail of it.

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. Are you in love? Aha! You're blushing!

SHIPUCHIN. [To his wife] Tanya, dear, do go out into the public office for a moment. I shan't be long.

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. All right. [Goes out.]

SHIPUCHIN. I don't understand anything of this. You've obviously come to the wrong place, madam. Your petition doesn't concern us at all. You should go to the department in which your husband was employed.

MERCHUTKINA. I've been there a good many times these five months, and they wouldn't even look at my petition. I'd given up all hopes, but, thanks to my son-in-law, Boris Matveyitch, I thought of coming to you. "You go, mother," he says, "and apply to Mr. Shipuchin, he's an influential man and can do anything." Help me, your excellency!

SHIPUCHIN. We can't do anything for you, Mrs. Merchutkina. You must understand that your husband, so far as I can gather, was in the employ of the Army Medical Department, while this is a private, commercial concern, a bank. Don't you understand that?

MERCHUTKINA. Your excellency, I can produce a doctor's certificate of my husband's illness. Here it is, just look at it....

SHIPUCHIN. [Irritated] That's all right; I quite believe you, but it's not our business. [Behind the scene, TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA'S laughter is heard, then a man's. SHIPUCHIN glances at the door] She's disturbing the employees. [To MERCHUTKINA] It's strange and it's even silly. Surely

your husband knows where you ought to apply?

MERCHUTKINA. Your excellency, I don't let him know anything. He just
cried out: "It isn't your business! Get out of this!" And...

SHIPUCHIN. Madam, I repeat, your husband was in the employ of the
Army
Medical Department, and this is a bank, a private, commercial concern.

MERCHUTKINA. Yes, yes, yes.... I understand, my dear. In that case,
your
excellency, just order them to pay me 15 roubles! I don't mind taking
that to be going on with.

SHIPUCHIN. [Sighs] Ouf!

KHIRIN. Andrey Andreyevitch, I'll never finish the report at this rate!

SHIPUCHIN. One moment. [To MERCHUTKINA] I can't get any
sense out of
you. But do understand that your taking this business here is as absurd
as if you took a divorce petition to a chemist's or into a gold assay
office. [Knock at the door. The voice of TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA is
heard,
"Can I come in, Andrey?" SHIPUCHIN shouts] Just wait one minute,
dear!

[To MERCHUTKINA] What has it got to do with us if you haven't
been paid?

As it happens, madam, this is an anniversary to-day, we're busy... and
somebody may be coming here at any moment.... Excuse me....

MERCHUTKINA. Your excellency, have pity on me, an orphan! I'm a
weak,
defenceless woman.... I'm tired to death.... I'm having trouble with my
lodgers, and on account of my husband, and I've got the house to look
after, and my son-in-law is out of work....

SHIPUCHIN. Mrs. Merchutkina, I... No, excuse me, I can't talk to you!
My
head's even in a whirl.... You are disturbing us and making us waste
our time. [Sighs, aside] What a business, as my name's Shipuchin!
[To KHIRIN] Kuma Nicolaievitch, will you please explain to Mrs.
Merchutkina. [Waves his hand and goes out into public department.]

KHIRIN. [Approaching MERCHUTKINA, angrily] What do you
want?

MERCHUTKINA. I'm a weak, defenceless woman.... I may look all
right, but
if you were to take me to pieces you wouldn't find a single healthy bit
in me! I can hardly stand on my legs, and I've lost my appetite. I drank
my coffee to-day and got no pleasure out of it.

KHIRIN. I ask you, what do you want?

MERCHUTKINA. Tell them, my dear, to give me 15 roubles, and a
month
later will do for the rest.

KHIRIN. But haven't you been told perfectly plainly that this is a bank!

MERCHUTKINA. Yes, yes.... And if you like I can show you the
doctor's
certificate.

KHIRIN. Have you got a head on your shoulders, or what?

MERCHUTKINA. My dear, I'm asking for what's mine by law. I don't
want
what isn't mine.

KHIRIN. I ask you, madam, have you got a head on your shoulders, or
what? Well, devil take me, I haven't any time to talk to you! I'm
busy.... [Points to the door] That way, please!

MERCHUTKINA. [Surprised] And where's the money?

KHIRIN. You haven't a head, but this [Taps the table and then points to his forehead.]

MERCHUTKINA. [Offended] What? Well, never mind, never mind.... You can do that to your own wife, but I'm the wife of a civil servant.... You can't do that to me!

KHIRIN. [Losing his temper] Get out of this!

MERCHUTKINA. No, no, no... none of that!

KHIRIN. If you don't get out this second, I'll call for the hall-porter! Get out! [Stamping.]

MERCHUTKINA. Never mind, never mind! I'm not afraid! I've seen the like of you before! Miser!

KHIRIN. I don't think I've ever seen a more awful woman in my life.... Ouf! It's given me a headache.... [Breathing heavily] I tell you once more... do you hear me? If you don't get out of this, you old devil, I'll grind you into powder! I've got such a character that I'm perfectly capable of laming you for life! I can commit a crime!

MERCHUTKINA. I've heard barking dogs before. I'm not afraid. I've seen the like of you before.

KHIRIN. [In despair] I can't stand it! I'm ill! I can't! [Sits down at his desk] They've let the Bank get filled with women, and I can't finish my report! I can't.

MERCHUTKINA. I don't want anybody else's money, but my own, according to law. You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Sitting in a government

office
in felt boots....

[Enter SHIPUCHIN and TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA.]

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [Following her husband] We spent the evening at the Berezhnitskys. Katya was wearing a sky-blue frock of foulard silk, cut low at the neck.... She looks very well with her hair done over her head, and I did her hair myself.... She was perfectly fascinating....

SHIPUCHIN. [Who has had enough of it already] Yes, yes... fascinating.... They may be here any moment....

MERCHUTKINA. Your excellency!

SHIPUCHIN. [Dully] What else? What do you want?

MERCHUTKINA. Your excellency! [Points to KHIRIN] This man... this man tapped the table with his finger, and then his head.... You told him to look after my affair, but he insults me and says all sorts of things. I'm a weak, defenceless woman....

SHIPUCHIN. All right, madam, I'll see to it... and take the necessary steps.... Go away now... later on! [Aside] My gout's coming on!

KHIRIN. [In a low tone to SHIPUCHIN] Andrey Andreyevitch, send for the hall-porter and have her turned out neck and crop! What else can we do?

SHIPUCHIN. [Frightened] No, no! She'll kick up a row and we aren't the only people in the building.

MERCHUTKINA. Your excellency.

KHIRIN. [In a tearful voice] But I've got to finish my report! I won't have time! I won't!

MERCHUTKINA. Your excellency, when shall I have the money? I want it now.

SHIPUCHIN. [Aside, in dismay] A re-mark-ab-ly beastly woman! [Politely] Madam, I've already told you, this is a bank, a private, commercial concern.

MERCHUTKINA. Be a father to me, your excellency.... If the doctor's certificate isn't enough, I can get you another from the police. Tell them to give me the money!

SHIPUCHIN. [Panting] Ouf!

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [To MERCHUTKINA] Mother, haven't you already been told that you're disturbing them? What right have you?

MERCHUTKINA. Mother, beautiful one, nobody will help me. All I do is to eat and drink, and just now I didn't enjoy my coffee at all.

SHIPUCHIN. [Exhausted] How much do you want?

MERCHUTKINA. 24 roubles 36 copecks.

SHIPUCHIN. All right! [Takes a 25-rouble note out of his pocket-book and gives it to her] Here are 25 roubles. Take it and... go!

[KHIRIN coughs angrily.]

MERCHUTKINA. I thank you very humbly, your excellency. [Hides the

money.]

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [Sits by her husband] It's time I went home....

[Looks at watch] But I haven't done yet.... I'll finish in one minute and go away.... What a time we had! Yes, what a time! We went to spend

the evening at the Berezhnitskys.... It was all right, quite fun, but nothing in particular.... Katya's devoted Grendilevsky was there, of course.... Well, I talked to Katya, cried, and induced her to talk to Grendilevsky and refuse him. Well, I thought, everything's, settled the best possible way; I've quieted mamma down, saved Katya, and can be quiet myself.... What do you think? Katya and I were going along the

avenue, just before supper, and suddenly... [Excitedly] And suddenly we heard a shot.... No, I can't talk about it calmly! [Waves her handkerchief] No, I can't!

SHIPUCHIN. [Sighs] Ouf!

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [Weeps] We ran to the summer-house, and there...

there poor Grendilevsky was lying... with a pistol in his hand....

SHIPUCHIN. No, I can't stand this! I can't stand it! [To MERCHUTKINA]

What else do you want?

MERCHUTKINA. Your excellency, can't my husband go back to his job?

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [Weeping] He'd shot himself right in the heart...

here.... And the poor man had fallen down senseless.... And he was awfully frightened, as he lay there... and asked for a doctor. A doctor came soon... and saved the unhappy man....

MERCHUTKINA. Your excellency, can't my husband go back to his

job?

SHIPUCHIN. No, I can't stand this! [Weeps] I can't stand it! [Stretches out both his hands in despair to KHIRIN] Drive her away! Drive her away,
I implore you!

KHIRIN. [Goes up to TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA] Get out of this!

SHIPUCHIN. Not her, but this one... this awful woman.... [Points] That one!

KHIRIN. [Not understanding, to TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA] Get out of this!
[Stamps] Get out!

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. What? What are you doing? Have you taken leave of
your senses?

SHIPUCHIN. It's awful? I'm a miserable man! Drive her out! Out with her!

KHIRIN. [To TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA] Out of it! I'll cripple you! I'll knock
you out of shape! I'll break the law!

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [Running from him; he chases her] How dare you! You
impudent fellow! [Shouts] Andrey! Help! Andrey! [Screams.]

SHIPUCHIN. [Chasing them] Stop! I implore you! Not such a noise? Have
pity on me!

KHIRIN. [Chasing MERCHUTKINA] Out of this! Catch her! Hit her! Cut her
into pieces!

SHIPUCHIN. [Shouts] Stop! I ask you! I implore you!

MERCHUTKINA. Little fathers... little fathers! [Screams] Little fathers!...

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [Shouts] Help! Help!... Oh, oh... I'm sick, I'm

sick! [Jumps on to a chair, then falls on to the sofa and groans as if in a faint.]

KHIRIN. [Chasing MERCHUTKINA] Hit her! Beat her! Cut her to pieces!

MERCHUTKINA. Oh, oh... little fathers, it's all dark before me! Ah! [Falls senseless into SHIPUCHIN'S arms. There is a knock at the door; a VOICE announces THE DEPUTATION] The deputation... reputation... occupation...

KHIRIN. [Stamps] Get out of it, devil take me! [Turns up his sleeves] Give her to me: I may break the law!

[A deputation of five men enters; they all wear frockcoats. One carries the velvet-covered address, another, the loving-cup. Employees look in at the door, from the public department. TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA on the sofa, and MERCHUTKINA in SHIPUCHIN'S arms are both groaning.]

ONE OF THE DEPUTATION. [Reads aloud] "Deeply respected and dear Andrey Andreyevitch! Throwing a retrospective glance at the past history of our financial administration, and reviewing in our minds its gradual development, we receive an extremely satisfactory impression. It is true that in the first period of its existence, the inconsiderable amount of its capital, and the absence of serious operations of any description, and also the indefinite aims of this bank, made us attach an extreme importance to the question raised by Hamlet, 'To be or not to be,'

and at one time there were even voices to be heard demanding our liquidation. But at that moment you become the head of our concern. Your knowledge, energies, and your native tact were the causes of extraordinary success and widespread extension. The reputation of the bank... [Coughs] reputation of the bank..."

MERCHUTKINA. [Groans] Oh! Oh!

TATIANA ALEXEYEVNA. [Groans] Water! Water!

THE MEMBER OF THE DEPUTATION. [Continues] The reputation [Coughs]... the reputation of the bank has been raised by you to such a height that we are now the rivals of the best foreign concerns.

SHIPUCHIN. Deputation... reputation... occupation.... Two friends that had a walk at night, held converse by the pale moonlight.... Oh tell me not, that youth is vain, that jealousy has turned my brain.

THE MEMBER OF THE DEPUTATION. [Continues in confusion] "Then, throwing an objective glance at the present condition of things, we, deeply respected and dear Andrey Andreyevitch... [Lowering his voice] In that case, we'll do it later on.... Yes, later on...." [DEPUTATION goes out in confusion.]

Curtain.

The Cremona Violin

by Amy Lowell

from Project Gutenberg's Etext #841 of *Men, Women and Ghosts*

Part First

Frau Concert-Meister Altgelt shut the door.
A storm was rising, heavy gusts of wind
Swirled through the trees, and scattered leaves before
Her on the clean, flagged path. The sky behind
The distant town was black, and sharp defined
Against it shone the lines of roofs and towers,
Superimposed and flat like cardboard flowers.

A pasted city on a purple ground,
Picked out with luminous paint, it seemed. The cloud
Split on an edge of lightning, and a sound
Of rivers full and rushing boomed through bowed,
Tossed, hissing branches. Thunder rumbled loud
Beyond the town fast swallowing into gloom.
Frau Altgelt closed the windows of each room.

She bustled round to shake by constant moving
The strange, weird atmosphere. She stirred the fire,
She twitched the supper-cloth as though improving
Its careful setting, then her own attire
Came in for notice, tiptoeing higher and higher
She peered into the wall-glass, now adjusting
A straying lock, or else a ribbon thrusting

This way or that to suit her. At last sitting,
Or rather plumping down upon a chair,
She took her work, the stocking she was knitting,
And watched the rain upon the window glare
In white, bright drops. Through the black glass a flare
Of lightning squirmed about her needles. "Oh!"
She cried. "What can be keeping Theodore so!"

A roll of thunder set the casements clapping.
Frau Altgelt flung her work aside and ran,
Pulled open the house door, with kerchief flapping
She stood and gazed along the street. A man
Flung back the garden-gate and nearly ran
Her down as she stood in the door. "Why, Dear,
What in the name of patience brings you here?"

Quick, Lotta, shut the door, my violin
I fear is wetted. Now, Dear, bring a light.
This clasp is very much too worn and thin.
I'll take the other fiddle out to-night
If it still rains. Tut! Tut! my child, you're quite
Clumsy. Here, help me, hold the case while I --
Give me the candle. No, the inside's dry.

Thank God for that! Well, Lotta, how are you?
A bad storm, but the house still stands, I see.
Is my pipe filled, my Dear? I'll have a few
Puffs and a snooze before I eat my tea.
What do you say? That you were feared for me?
Nonsense, my child. Yes, kiss me, now don't talk.
I need a rest, the theatre's a long walk."

Her needles still, her hands upon her lap
Patiently laid, Charlotta Altgelt sat
And watched the rain-run window. In his nap
Her husband stirred and muttered. Seeing that,
Charlotta rose and softly, pit-a-pat,
Climbed up the stairs, and in her little room
Found sighing comfort with a moon in bloom.

But even rainy windows, silver-lit
By a new-burst, storm-whetted moon, may give
But poor content to loneliness, and it
Was hard for young Charlotta so to strive
And down her eagerness and learn to live

In placid quiet. While her husband slept,
Charlotta in her upper chamber wept.

Herr Concert-Meister Altgelt was a man
Gentle and unambitious, that alone
Had kept him back. He played as few men can,
Drawing out of his instrument a tone
So shimmering-sweet and palpitant, it shone
Like a bright thread of sound hung in the air,
Afloat and swinging upward, slim and fair.

Above all things, above Charlotta his wife,
Herr Altgelt loved his violin, a fine
Cremona pattern, Stradivari's life
Was flowering out of early discipline
When this was fashioned. Of soft-cutting pine
The belly was. The back of broadly curled
Maple, the head made thick and sharply whirled.

The slanting, youthful sound-holes through
The belly of fine, vigorous pine
Mellowed each note and blew
It out again with a woody flavour
Tanged and fragrant as fir-trees are
When breezes in their needles jar.

The varnish was an orange-brown
Lustered like glass that's long laid down
Under a crumbling villa stone.
Purpled stoutly, with mitres which point
Straight up the corners. Each curve and joint
Clear, and bold, and thin.
Such was Herr Theodore's violin.

Seven o'clock, the Concert-Meister gone
With his best violin, the rain being stopped,
Frau Lotta in the kitchen sat alone
Watching the embers which the fire dropped.

The china shone upon the dresser, topped
By polished copper vessels which her skill
Kept brightly burnished. It was very still.

An air from 'Orfeo' hummed in her head.
Herr Altgelt had been practising before
The night's performance. Charlotta had plead
With him to stay with her. Even at the door
She'd begged him not to go. "I do implore
You for this evening, Theodore," she had said.
"Leave them to-night, and stay with me instead."

"A silly poppet!" Theodore pinched her ear.
"You'd like to have our good Elector turn
Me out I think." "But, Theodore, something queer
Ails me. Oh, do but notice how they burn,
My cheeks! The thunder worried me. You're stern,
And cold, and only love your work, I know.
But Theodore, for this evening, do not go."

But he had gone, hurriedly at the end,
For she had kept him talking. Now she sat
Alone again, always alone, the trend
Of all her thinking brought her back to that
She wished to banish. What would life be? What?
For she was young, and loved, while he was moved
Only by music. Each day that was proved.

Each day he rose and practised. While he played,
She stopped her work and listened, and her heart
Swelled painfully beneath her bodice. Swayed
And longing, she would hide from him her smart.
"Well, Lottchen, will that do?" Then what a start
She gave, and she would run to him and cry,
And he would gently chide her, "Fie, Dear, fie."

I'm glad I played it well. But such a taking!
You'll hear the thing enough before I've done."

And she would draw away from him, still shaking.
Had he but guessed she was another one,
Another violin. Her strings were aching,
Stretched to the touch of his bow hand, again
He played and she almost broke at the strain.

Where was the use of thinking of it now,
Sitting alone and listening to the clock!
She'd best make haste and knit another row.
Three hours at least must pass before his knock
Would startle her. It always was a shock.
She listened -- listened -- for so long before,
That when it came her hearing almost tore.

She caught herself just starting in to listen.
What nerves she had: rattling like brittle sticks!
She wandered to the window, for the glisten
Of a bright moon was tempting. Snuffed the wicks
Of her two candles. Still she could not fix
To anything. The moon in a broad swath
Beckoned her out and down the garden-path.

Against the house, her hollyhocks stood high
And black, their shadows doubling them. The night
Was white and still with moonlight, and a sigh
Of blowing leaves was there, and the dim flight
Of insects, and the smell of aconite,
And stocks, and Marvel of Peru. She flitted
Along the path, where blocks of shadow pitted

The even flags. She let herself go dreaming
Of Theodore her husband, and the tune
From 'Orfeo' swam through her mind, but seeming
Changed -- shriller. Of a sudden, the clear moon
Showed her a passer-by, inopportune
Indeed, but here he was, whistling and striding.
Lotta squeezed in between the currants, hiding.

"The best laid plans of mice and men," alas!
The stranger came indeed, but did not pass.
Instead, he leant upon the garden-gate,
Folding his arms and whistling. Lotta's state,
Crouched in the prickly currants, on wet grass,
Was far from pleasant. Still the stranger stayed,
And Lotta in her currants watched, dismayed.

He seemed a proper fellow standing there
In the bright moonshine. His cocked hat was laced
With silver, and he wore his own brown hair
Tied, but unpowdered. His whole bearing graced
A fine cloth coat, and ruffled shirt, and chased
Sword-hilt. Charlotta looked, but her position
Was hardly easy. When would his volition

Suggest his walking on? And then that tune!
A half-a-dozen bars from 'Orfeo'
Gone over and over, and murdered. What Fortune
Had brought him there to stare about him so?
"Ach, Gott im Himmel! Why will he not go!"
Thought Lotta, but the young man whistled on,
And seemed in no great hurry to be gone.

Charlotta, crouched among the currant bushes,
Watched the moon slowly dip from twig to twig.
If Theodore should chance to come, and blushes
Streamed over her. He would not care a fig,
He'd only laugh. She pushed aside a sprig
Of sharp-edged leaves and peered, then she uprose
Amid her bushes. "Sir," said she, "pray whose

Garden do you suppose you're watching? Why
Do you stand there? I really must insist
Upon your leaving. 'Tis unmannerly
To stay so long." The young man gave a twist
And turned about, and in the amethyst
Moonlight he saw her like a nymph half-risen

From the green bushes which had been her prison.

He swept his hat off in a hurried bow.
"Your pardon, Madam, I had no idea
I was not quite alone, and that is how
I came to stay. My trespass was not sheer
Impertinence. I thought no one was here,
And really gardens cry to be admired.
To-night especially it seemed required.

And may I beg to introduce myself?
Heinrich Marohl of Munich. And your name?"
Charlotta told him. And the artful elf
Promptly exclaimed about her husband's fame.
So Lotta, half-unwilling, slowly came
To conversation with him. When she went
Into the house, she found the evening spent.

Theodore arrived quite wearied out and teased,
With all excitement in him burned away.
It had gone well, he said, the audience pleased,
And he had played his very best to-day,
But afterwards he had been forced to stay
And practise with the stupid ones. His head
Ached furiously, and he must get to bed.

Part Second

Herr Concert-Meister Altgelt played,
And the four strings of his violin
Were spinning like bees on a day in Spring.
The notes rose into the wide sun-mote
Which slanted through the window,
They lay like coloured beads a-row,
They knocked together and parted,
And started to dance,
Skipping, tripping, each one slipping

Under and over the others so
That the polychrome fire streamed like a lance
Or a comet's tail,
Behind them.
Then a wail arose -- crescendo --
And dropped from off the end of the bow,
And the dancing stopped.
A scent of lilies filled the room,
Long and slow. Each large white bloom
Breathed a sound which was holy perfume from a blessed censer,
And the hum of an organ tone,
And they waved like fans in a hall of stone
Over a bier standing there in the centre, alone.
Each lily bent slowly as it was blown.
Like smoke they rose from the violin --
Then faded as a swifter bowing
Jumbled the notes like wavelets flowing
In a splashing, pashing, rippling motion
Between broad meadows to an ocean
Wide as a day and blue as a flower,
Where every hour
Gulls dipped, and scattered, and squawked, and squealed,
And over the marshes the Angelus pealed,
And the prows of the fishing-boats were spattered
With spray.
And away a couple of frigates were starting
To race to Java with all sails set,
Topgallants, and royals, and stunsails, and jibs,
And wide moonsails; and the shining rails
Were polished so bright they sparked in the sun.
All the sails went up with a run:
 "They call me Hanging Johnny,
 Away-i-oh;
 They call me Hanging Johnny,
 So hang, boys, hang."
And the sun had set and the high moon whitened,
And the ship heeled over to the breeze.
He drew her into the shade of the sails,

And whispered tales
Of voyages in the China seas,
And his arm around her
Held and bound her.
She almost swooned,
With the breeze and the moon
And the slipping sea,
And he beside her,
Touching her, leaning --
The ship careening,
With the white moon steadily shining over
Her and her lover,
Theodore, still her lover!

Then a quiver fell on the crowded notes,
And slowly floated
A single note which spread and spread
Till it filled the room with a shimmer like gold,
And noises shivered throughout its length,
And tried its strength.
They pulled it, and tore it,
And the stuff waned thinner, but still it bore it.
Then a wide rent
Split the arching tent,
And balls of fire spurted through,
Spitting yellow, and mauve, and blue.
One by one they were quenched as they fell,
Only the blue burned steadily.
Paler and paler it grew, and -- faded -- away.
Herr Altgelt stopped.

"Well, Lottachen, my Dear, what do you say?
I think I'm in good trim. Now let's have dinner.
What's this, my Love, you're very sweet to-day.
I wonder how it happens I'm the winner
Of so much sweetness. But I think you're thinner;
You're like a bag of feathers on my knee.
Why, Lotta child, you're almost strangling me.

I'm glad you're going out this afternoon.
The days are getting short, and I'm so tied
At the Court Theatre my poor little bride
Has not much junketing I fear, but soon
I'll ask our manager to grant a boon.
To-night, perhaps, I'll get a pass for you,
And when I go, why Lotta can come too.

Now dinner, Love. I want some onion soup
To whip me up till that rehearsal's over.
You know it's odd how some women can stoop!
Fraulein Gebnitz has taken on a lover,
A Jew named Goldstein. No one can discover
If it's his money. But she lives alone
Practically. Gebnitz is a stone,

Pores over books all day, and has no ear
For his wife's singing. Artists must have men;
They need appreciation. But it's queer
What messes people make of their lives, when
They should know more. If Gebnitz finds out, then
His wife will pack. Yes, shut the door at once.
I did not feel it cold, I am a dunce."

Frau Altgelt tied her bonnet on and went
Into the streets. A bright, crisp Autumn wind
Flirted her skirts and hair. A turbulent,
Audacious wind it was, now close behind,
Pushing her bonnet forward till it twined
The strings across her face, then from in front
Slantingly swinging at her with a shunt,

Until she lay against it, struggling, pushing,
Dismayed to find her clothing tightly bound
Around her, every fold and wrinkle crushing
Itself upon her, so that she was wound
In draperies as clinging as those found

Sucking about a sea nymph on the frieze
Of some old Grecian temple. In the breeze

The shops and houses had a quality
Of hard and dazzling colour; something sharp
And buoyant, like white, puffing sails at sea.
The city streets were twanging like a harp.
Charlotta caught the movement, skipingly
She blew along the pavement, hardly knowing
Toward what destination she was going.

She fetched up opposite a jeweller's shop,
Where filigreed tiaras shone like crowns,
And necklaces of emeralds seemed to drop
And then float up again with lightness. Browns
Of striped agates struck her like cold frowns
Amid the gaiety of topaz seals,
Carved though they were with heads, and arms, and wheels.

A row of pencils knobbed with quartz or sard
Delighted her. And rings of every size
Turned smartly round like hoops before her eyes,
Amethyst-flamed or ruby-girdled, jarred
To spokes and flashing triangles, and starred
Like rockets bursting on a festal day.
Charlotta could not tear herself away.

With eyes glued tightly on a golden box,
Whose rare enamel piqued her with its hue,
Changeable, iridescent, shuttlecocks
Of shades and lustres always darting through
Its level, superimposing sheet of blue,
Charlotta did not hear footsteps approaching.
She started at the words: "Am I encroaching?"

"Oh, Heinrich, how you frightened me! I thought
We were to meet at three, is it quite that?"
"No, it is not," he answered, "but I've caught

The trick of missing you. One thing is flat,
I cannot go on this way. Life is what
Might best be conjured up by the word: `Hell'.
Dearest, when will you come?" Lotta, to quell

His effervescence, pointed to the gems
Within the window, asked him to admire
A bracelet or a buckle. But one stems
Uneasily the burning of a fire.
Heinrich was chafing, pricked by his desire.
Little by little she wooed him to her mood
Until at last he promised to be good.

But here he started on another tack;
To buy a jewel, which one would Lotta choose.
She vainly urged against him all her lack
Of other trinkets. Should she dare to use
A ring or brooch her husband might accuse
Her of extravagance, and ask to see
A strict accounting, or still worse might be.

But Heinrich would not be persuaded. Why
Should he not give her what he liked? And in
He went, determined certainly to buy
A thing so beautiful that it would win
Her wavering fancy. Altgelt's violin
He would outscore by such a handsome jewel
That Lotta could no longer be so cruel!

Pity Charlotta, torn in diverse ways.
If she went in with him, the shopman might
Recognize her, give her her name; in days
To come he could denounce her. In her fright
She almost fled. But Heinrich would be quite
Capable of pursuing. By and by
She pushed the door and entered hurriedly.

It took some pains to keep him from bestowing

A pair of ruby earrings, carved like roses,
The setting twined to represent the growing
Tendrils and leaves, upon her. "Who supposes
I could obtain such things! It simply closes
All comfort for me." So he changed his mind
And bought as slight a gift as he could find.

A locket, frosted over with seed pearls,
Oblong and slim, for wearing at the neck,
Or hidden in the bosom; their joined curls
Should lie in it. And further to bedeck
His love, Heinrich had picked a whiff, a fleck,
The merest puff of a thin, linked chain
To hang it from. Lotta could not refrain

From weeping as they sauntered down the street.
She did not want the locket, yet she did.
To have him love her she found very sweet,
But it is hard to keep love always hid.
Then there was something in her heart which chid
Her, told her she loved Theodore in him,
That all these meetings were a foolish whim.

She thought of Theodore and the life they led,
So near together, but so little mingled.
The great clouds bulged and bellied overhead,
And the fresh wind about her body tingled;
The crane of a large warehouse creaked and jingled;
Charlotta held her breath for very fear,
About her in the street she seemed to hear:

"They call me Hanging Johnny,
Away-i-oh;
They call me Hanging Johnny,
So hang, boys, hang."

And it was Theodore, under the racing skies,
Who held her and who whispered in her ear.
She knew her heart was telling her no lies,

Beating and hammering. He was so dear,
The touch of him would send her in a queer
Swoon that was half an ecstasy. And yearning
For Theodore, she wandered, slowly turning

Street after street as Heinrich wished it so.
He had some aim, she had forgotten what.
Their progress was confused and very slow,
But at the last they reached a lonely spot,
A garden far above the highest shot
Of soaring steeple. At their feet, the town
Spread open like a chequer-board laid down.

Lotta was dimly conscious of the rest,
Vaguely remembered how he clasped the chain
About her neck. She treated it in jest,
And saw his face cloud over with sharp pain.
Then suddenly she felt as though a strain
Were put upon her, collared like a slave,
Leashed in the meshes of this thing he gave.

She seized the flimsy rings with both her hands
To snap it, but they held with odd persistence.
Her eyes were blinded by two wind-blown strands
Of hair which had been loosened. Her resistance
Melted within her, from remotest distance,
Misty, unreal, his face grew warm and near,
And giving way she knew him very dear.

For long he held her, and they both gazed down
At the wide city, and its blue, bridged river.
From wooing he jested with her, snipped the blown
Strands of her hair, and tied them with a sliver
Cut from his own head. But she gave a shiver
When, opening the locket, they were placed
Under the glass, commingled and enlaced.

"When will you have it so with us?" He sighed.

She shook her head. He pressed her further. "No,
No, Heinrich, Theodore loves me," and she tried
To free herself and rise. He held her so,
Clipped by his arms, she could not move nor go.
"But you love me," he whispered, with his face
Burning against her through her kerchief's lace.

Frau Altgelt knew she toyed with fire, knew
That what her husband lit this other man
Fanned to hot flame. She told herself that few
Women were so discreet as she, who ran
No danger since she knew what things to ban.
She opened her house door at five o'clock,
A short half-hour before her husband's knock.

Part Third

The 'Residenz-Theater' sparked and hummed
With lights and people. Gebnitz was to sing,
That rare soprano. All the fiddles strummed
With tuning up; the wood-winds made a ring
Of reedy bubbling noises, and the sting
Of sharp, red brass pierced every ear-drum; patting
From muffled tympani made a dark slatting

Across the silver shimmering of flutes;
A bassoon grunted, and an oboe wailed;
The 'celli pizzicato-ed like great lutes,
And mutterings of double basses trailed
Away to silence, while loud harp-strings hailed
Their thin, bright colours down in such a scatter
They lost themselves amid the general clatter.

Frau Altgelt in the gallery, alone,
Felt lifted up into another world.
Before her eyes a thousand candles shone
In the great chandeliers. A maze of curled

And powdered periwigs past her eyes swirled.
She smelt the smoke of candles guttering,
And caught the glint of jewelled fans fluttering

All round her in the boxes. Red and gold,
The house, like rubies set in filigree,
Filliped the candlelight about, and bold
Young sparks with eye-glasses, unblushingly
Ogled fair beauties in the balcony.
An officer went by, his steel spurs jangling.
Behind Charlotta an old man was wrangling

About a play-bill he had bought and lost.
Three drunken soldiers had to be ejected.
Frau Altgelt's eyes stared at the vacant post
Of Concert-Meister, she at once detected
The stir which brought him. But she felt neglected
When with no glance about him or her way,
He lifted up his violin to play.

The curtain went up? Perhaps. If so,
Charlotta never saw it go.
The famous Fraeulein Gebnitz' singing
Only came to her like the ringing
Of bells at a festa
Which swing in the air
And nobody realizes they are there.
They jingle and jangle,
And clang, and bang,
And never a soul could tell whether they rang,
For the plopping of guns and rockets
And the chinking of silver to spend, in one's pockets,
And the shuffling and clapping of feet,
And the loud flapping
Of flags, with the drums,
As the military comes.
It's a famous tune to walk to,
And I wonder where they're off to.

Step-step-stepping to the beating of the drums.
But the rhythm changes as though a mist
Were curling and twisting
Over the landscape.
For a moment a rhythmless, tuneless fog
Encompasses her. Then her senses jog
To the breath of a stately minuet.
Herr Altgelt's violin is set
In tune to the slow, sweeping bows, and retreats and advances,
To curtsies brushing the waxen floor as the Court dances.
Long and peaceful like warm Summer nights
When stars shine in the quiet river. And against the lights
Blundering insects knock,
And the 'Rathaus' clock
Booms twice, through the shrill sounds
Of flutes and horns in the lamplit grounds.
Pressed against him in the mazy wavering
Of a country dance, with her short breath quavering
She leans upon the beating, throbbing
Music. Laughing, sobbing,
Feet gliding after sliding feet;
His -- hers --
The ballroom blurs --
She feels the air
Lifting her hair,
And the lapping of water on the stone stair.
He is there! He is there!
Twang harps, and squeal, you thin violins,
That the dancers may dance, and never discover
The old stone stair leading down to the river
With the chestnut-tree branches hanging over
Her and her lover.
Theodore, still her lover!

The evening passed like this, in a half faint,
Delirium with waking intervals
Which were the entr'acts. Under the restraint
Of a large company, the constant calls

For oranges or syrops from the stalls
Outside, the talk, the passing to and fro,
Lotta sat ill at ease, incognito.

She heard the Gebnitz praised, the tenor lauded,
The music vaunted as most excellent.
The scenery and the costumes were applauded,
The latter it was whispered had been sent
From Italy. The Herr Direktor spent
A fortune on them, so the gossips said.
Charlotta felt a lightness in her head.

When the next act began, her eyes were swimming,
Her prodded ears were aching and confused.
The first notes from the orchestra sent skimming
Her outward consciousness. Her brain was fused
Into the music, Theodore's music! Used
To hear him play, she caught his single tone.
For all she noticed they two were alone.

Part Fourth

Frau Altgelt waited in the chilly street,
Hustled by lackeys who ran up and down
Shouting their coachmen's names; forced to retreat
A pace or two by lurching chairmen; thrown
Rudely aside by linkboys; boldly shown
The ogling rapture in two bleary eyes
Thrust close to hers in most unpleasant wise.

Escaping these, she hit a liveried arm,
Was sworn at by this glittering gentleman
And ordered off. However, no great harm
Came to her. But she looked a trifle wan
When Theodore, her belated guardian,
Emerged. She snuggled up against him, trembling,
Half out of fear, half out of the assembling

Of all the thoughts and needs his playing had given.
Had she enjoyed herself, he wished to know.
"Oh! Theodore, can't you feel that it was Heaven!"
"Heaven! My Lottachen, and was it so?
Gebnitz was in good voice, but all the flow
Of her last aria was spoiled by Klops,
A wretched flutist, she was mad as hops."

He was so simple, so matter-of-fact,
Charlotta Altgelt knew not what to say
To bring him to her dream. His lack of tact
Kept him explaining all the homeward way
How this thing had gone well, that badly. "Stay,
Theodore!" she cried at last. "You know to me
Nothing was real, it was an ecstasy."

And he was heartily glad she had enjoyed
Herself so much, and said so. "But it's good
To be got home again." He was employed
In looking at his violin, the wood
Was old, and evening air did it no good.
But when he drew up to the table for tea
Something about his wife's vivacity

Struck him as hectic, worried him in short.
He talked of this and that but watched her close.
Tea over, he endeavoured to extort
The cause of her excitement. She arose
And stood beside him, trying to compose
Herself, all whipt to quivering, curdled life,
And he, poor fool, misunderstood his wife.

Suddenly, broken through her anxious grasp,
Her music-kindled love crashed on him there.
Amazed, he felt her fling against him, clasp
Her arms about him, weighing down his chair,
Sobbing out all her hours of despair.

"Theodore, a woman needs to hear things proved.
Unless you tell me, I feel I'm not loved."

Theodore went under in this tearing wave,
He yielded to it, and its headlong flow
Filled him with all the energy she gave.
He was a youth again, and this bright glow,
This living, vivid joy he had to show
Her what she was to him. Laughing and crying,
She asked assurances there's no denying.

Over and over again her questions, till
He quite convinced her, every now and then
She kissed him, shivering as though doubting still.
But later when they were composed and when
She dared relax her probings, "Lottachen,"
He asked, "how is it your love has withstood
My inadvertence? I was made of wood."

She told him, and no doubt she meant it truly,
That he was sun, and grass, and wind, and sky
To her. And even if conscience were unruly
She salved it by neat sophistries, but why
Suppose her insincere, it was no lie
She said, for Heinrich was as much forgot
As though he'd never been within earshot.

But Theodore's hands in straying and caressing
Fumbled against the locket where it lay
Upon her neck. "What is this thing I'm pressing?"
He asked. "Let's bring it to the light of day."
He lifted up the locket. "It should stay
Outside, my Dear. Your mother has good taste.
To keep it hidden surely is a waste."

Pity again Charlotta, straight aroused
Out of her happiness. The locket brought
A chilly jet of truth upon her, soused

Under its icy spurting she was caught,
And choked, and frozen. Suddenly she sought
The clasp, but with such art was this contrived
Her fumbling fingers never once arrived

Upon it. Feeling, twisting, round and round,
She pulled the chain quite through the locket's ring
And still it held. Her neck, encompassed, bound,
Chafed at the sliding meshes. Such a thing
To hurl her out of joy! A gilded string
Binding her folly to her, and those curls
Which lay entwined beneath the clustered pearls!

Again she tried to break the cord. It stood.
"Unclasp it, Theodore," she begged. But he
Refused, and being in a happy mood,
Twitted her with her inefficiency,
Then looking at her very seriously:
"I think, Charlotta, it is well to have
Always about one what a mother gave.

As she has taken the great pains to send
This jewel to you from Dresden, it will be
Ingratitude if you do not intend
To carry it about you constantly.
With her fine taste you cannot disagree,
The locket is most beautifully designed."
He opened it and there the curls were, twined.

Charlotta's heart dropped beats like knitting-stitches.
She burned a moment, flaming; then she froze.
Her face was jerked by little, nervous twitches,
She heard her husband asking: "What are those?"
Put out her hand quickly to interpose,
But stopped, the gesture half-complete, astounded
At the calm way the question was propounded.

"A pretty fancy, Dear, I do declare.

Indeed I will not let you put it off.
A lovely thought: yours and your mother's hair!"
Charlotta hid a gasp under a cough.
"Never with my connivance shall you doff
This charming gift." He kissed her on the cheek,
And Lotta suffered him, quite crushed and meek.

When later in their room she lay awake,
Watching the moonlight slip along the floor,
She felt the chain and wept for Theodore's sake.
She had loved Heinrich also, and the core
Of truth, unlovely, startled her. Wherefore
She vowed from now to break this double life
And see herself only as Theodore's wife.

Part Fifth

It was no easy matter to convince
Heinrich that it was finished. Hard to say
That though they could not meet (he saw her wince)
She still must keep the locket to allay
Suspicion in her husband. She would pay
Him from her savings bit by bit -- the oath
He swore at that was startling to them both.

Her resolution taken, Frau Altgelt
Adhered to it, and suffered no regret.
She found her husband all that she had felt
His music to contain. Her days were set
In his as though she were an amulet
Cased in bright gold. She joyed in her confining;
Her eyes put out her looking-glass with shining.

Charlotta was so gay that old, dull tasks
Were furbished up to seem like rituals.
She baked and brewed as one who only asks
The right to serve. Her daily manuals

Of prayer were duties, and her festivals
When Theodore praised some dish, or frankly said
She had a knack in making up a bed.

So Autumn went, and all the mountains round
The city glittered white with fallen snow,
For it was Winter. Over the hard ground
Herr Altgelt's footsteps came, each one a blow.
On the swept flags behind the currant row
Charlotta stood to greet him. But his lip
Only flicked hers. His Concert-Meistership

Was first again. This evening he had got
Important news. The opera ordered from
Young Mozart was arrived. That old despot,
The Bishop of Salzburg, had let him come
Himself to lead it, and the parts, still hot
From copying, had been tried over. Never
Had any music started such a fever.

The orchestra had cheered till they were hoarse,
The singers clapped and clapped. The town was made,
With such a great attraction through the course
Of Carnival time. In what utter shade
All other cities would be left! The trade
In music would all drift here naturally.
In his excitement he forgot his tea.

Lotta was forced to take his cup and put
It in his hand. But still he rattled on,
Sipping at intervals. The new catgut
Strings he was using gave out such a tone
The "Maestro" had remarked it, and had gone
Out of his way to praise him. Lotta smiled,
He was as happy as a little child.

From that day on, Herr Altgelt, more and more,
Absorbed himself in work. Lotta at first

Was patient and well-wishing. But it wore
Upon her when two weeks had brought no burst
Of loving from him. Then she feared the worst;
That his short interest in her was a light
Flared up an instant only in the night.

'Idomeneo' was the opera's name,
A name that poor Charlotta learnt to hate.
Herr Altgelt worked so hard he seldom came
Home for his tea, and it was very late,
Past midnight sometimes, when he knocked. His state
Was like a flabby orange whose crushed skin
Is thin with pulling, and all dented in.

He practised every morning and her heart
Followed his bow. But often she would sit,
While he was playing, quite withdrawn apart,
Absently fingering and touching it,
The locket, which now seemed to her a bit
Of some gone youth. His music drew her tears,
And through the notes he played, her dreading ears

Heard Heinrich's voice, saying he had not changed;
Beer merchants had no ecstasies to take
Their minds off love. So far her thoughts had ranged
Away from her stern vow, she chanced to take
Her way, one morning, quite by a mistake,
Along the street where Heinrich had his shop.
What harm to pass it since she should not stop!

It matters nothing how one day she met
Him on a bridge, and blushed, and hurried by.
Nor how the following week he stood to let
Her pass, the pavement narrowing suddenly.
How once he took her basket, and once he
Pulled back a rearing horse who might have struck
Her with his hoofs. It seemed the oddest luck

How many times their business took them each
Right to the other. Then at last he spoke,
But she would only nod, he got no speech
From her. Next time he treated it in joke,
And that so lightly that her vow she broke
And answered. So they drifted into seeing
Each other as before. There was no fleeing.

Christmas was over and the Carnival
Was very near, and tripping from each tongue
Was talk of the new opera. Each book-stall
Flaunted it out in bills, what airs were sung,
What singers hired. Pictures of the young
"Maestro" were for sale. The town was mad.
Only Charlotta felt depressed and sad.

Each day now brought a struggle 'twixt her will
And Heinrich's. 'Twixt her love for Theodore
And him. Sometimes she wished to kill
Herself to solve her problem. For a score
Of reasons Heinrich tempted her. He bore
Her moods with patience, and so surely urged
Himself upon her, she was slowly merged

Into his way of thinking, and to fly
With him seemed easy. But next morning would
The Stradivarius undo her mood.
Then she would realize that she must cleave
Always to Theodore. And she would try
To convince Heinrich she should never leave,
And afterwards she would go home and grieve.

All thought in Munich centered on the part
Of January when there would be given
'Idomeneo' by Wolfgang Mozart.
The twenty-ninth was fixed. And all seats, even
Those almost at the ceiling, which were driven
Behind the highest gallery, were sold.

The inches of the theatre went for gold.

Herr Altgelt was a shadow worn so thin
With work, he hardly printed black behind
The candle. He and his old violin
Made up one person. He was not unkind,
But dazed outside his playing, and the rind,
The pine and maple of his fiddle, guarded
A part of him which he had quite discarded.

It woke in the silence of frost-bright nights,
In little lights,
Like will-o'-the-wisps flickering, fluttering,
Here -- there --
Spurting, sputtering,
Fading and lighting,
Together, asunder --
Till Lotta sat up in bed with wonder,
And the faint grey patch of the window shone
Upon her sitting there, alone.
For Theodore slept.

The twenty-eighth was last rehearsal day,
'Twas called for noon, so early morning meant
Herr Altgelt's only time in which to play
His part alone. Drawn like a monk who's spent
Himself in prayer and fasting, Theodore went
Into the kitchen, with a weary word
Of cheer to Lotta, careless if she heard.

Lotta heard more than his spoken word.
She heard the vibrating of strings and wood.
She was washing the dishes, her hands all suds,
When the sound began,
Long as the span
Of a white road snaking about a hill.
The orchards are filled
With cherry blossoms at butterfly poise.

Hawthorn buds are cracking,
And in the distance a shepherd is clacking
His shears, snip-snipping the wool from his sheep.
The notes are asleep,
Lying adrift on the air
In level lines
Like sunlight hanging in pines and pines,
Strung and threaded,
All imbedded
In the blue-green of the hazy pines.
Lines -- long, straight lines!
And stems,
Long, straight stems
Pushing up
To the cup of blue, blue sky.
Stems growing misty
With the many of them,
Red-green mist
Of the trees,
And these
Wood-flavoured notes.
The back is maple and the belly is pine.
The rich notes twine
As though weaving in and out of leaves,
Broad leaves
Flapping slowly like elephants' ears,
Waving and falling.
Another sound peers
Through little pine fingers,
And lingers, peeping.
Ping! Ping! pizzicato, something is cheeping.
There is a twittering up in the branches,
A chirp and a lilt,
And crimson atilt on a swaying twig.
Wings! Wings!
And a little ruffled-out throat which sings.
The forest bends, tumultuous
With song.

The woodpecker knocks,
And the song-sparrow trills,
Every fir, and cedar, and yew
Has a nest or a bird,
It is quite absurd
To hear them cutting across each other:
Peewits, and thrushes, and larks, all at once,
And a loud cuckoo is trying to smother
A wood-pigeon perched on a birch,
"Roo -- coo -- oo -- oo --"
"Cuckoo! Cuckoo! That's one for you!"
A blackbird whistles, how sharp, how shrill!
And the great trees toss
And leaves blow down,
You can almost hear them splash on the ground.
The whistle again:
It is double and loud!
The leaves are splashing,
And water is dashing
Over those creepers, for they are shrouds;
And men are running up them to furl the sails,
For there is a capful of wind to-day,
And we are already well under way.
The deck is aslant in the bubbling breeze.
"Theodore, please.
Oh, Dear, how you tease!"
And the boatswain's whistle sounds again,
And the men pull on the sheets:
 "My name is Hanging Johnny,
 Away-i-oh;
 They call me Hanging Johnny,
 So hang, boys, hang."
The trees of the forest are masts, tall masts;
They are swinging over
Her and her lover.
Almost swooning
Under the ballooning canvas,
She lies

Looking up in his eyes
As he bends farther over.
Theodore, still her lover!

The suds were dried upon Charlotta's hands,
She leant against the table for support,
Wholly forgotten. Theodore's eyes were brands
Burning upon his music. He stopped short.
Charlotta almost heard the sound of bands
Snapping. She put one hand up to her heart,
Her fingers touched the locket with a start.

Herr Altgelt put his violin away
Listlessly. "Lotta, I must have some rest.
The strain will be a hideous one to-day.
Don't speak to me at all. It will be best
If I am quiet till I go." And lest
She disobey, he left her. On the stairs
She heard his mounting steps. What use were prayers!

He could not hear, he was not there, for she
Was married to a mummy, a machine.
Her hand closed on the locket bitterly.
Before her, on a chair, lay the shagreen
Case of his violin. She saw the clean
Sun flash the open clasp. The locket's edge
Cut at her fingers like a pushing wedge.

A heavy cart went by, a distant bell
Chimed ten, the fire flickered in the grate.
She was alone. Her throat began to swell
With sobs. What kept her here, why should she wait?
The violin she had begun to hate
Lay in its case before her. Here she flung
The cover open. With the fiddle swung

Over her head, the hanging clock's loud ticking
Caught on her ear. 'Twas slow, and as she paused

The little door in it came open, flicking
A wooden cuckoo out: "Cuckoo!" It caused
The forest dream to come again. "Cuckoo!"
Smashed on the grate, the violin broke in two.

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" the clock kept striking on;
But no one listened. Frau Altgelt had gone.